



Inaugural Address, April 13, 2008
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University of Connecticut

The Mighty Heart of UConn: In Unity There Is Strength

Governor Rell, Chairman Rowe, members of the UConn Board of Trustees, Commissioner Meotti, Commissioner Galvin, distinguished legislators and delegates from other universities, honorable faculty, staff, students, and friends of the University – thank you all for being here today. And a special greeting to old friends from Iowa and Ohio, and to my brothers and sisters, my wife Virginia, our sons and daughter, our wonderful granddaughters, and our nieces and nephews – thanks to all of you for making this day even more special.

It's perfect that this wonderful celebration is taking place amidst the arrival of spring – a time we welcome each year as one of vibrant change and renewal. In New England, of course, Spring often prefers a dramatic entrance to a dull one – as if nature itself were insisting that we take notice of its rebirth and ponder anew the lessons it brings.

At some point in your life, for example, when you were younger, you were probably taught (as I was) that nature is “red in tooth and claw,” as Tennyson wrote – that it's best thought of as a ruthless arena for constant and unforgiving conflict.

We can thank Thomas Henry Huxley – Darwin's “bulldog” as he was called – for this rather inexact interpretation of Darwinian science. I say inexact because Darwin himself spent a lot of time making sense of cooperation in nature. While moralists of the time struggled to find clues for human conduct in Huxley's unfortunate caricature of Darwin's masterpiece, many ignored what the gentleman naturalist actually saw. And though the notion of cooperation among animals certainly has its place in *modern* biology, the roots of Huxley's “gladiator view” of nature still run deep in our thinking. Yet “to be explained,” wrote Daniel Simberloff, the eminent ecologist, “is why [conflict] dominates ecological thinking, given the paucity of hard data to support it.”

So let's consider the “data” before us now, as we take in the emerging beauty of springtime in Storrs. The forests around the Eagleville Preserve are coming alive again, the Willimantic River shines in the sun's April rays, the air all around is fresh with the scent of forsythia and pine, and rumbles of thunder from a spring storm can please our ears like the graveled voice of our grandfather. From the top of Horsebarn Hill, just across from where I live, the whole world seems to be turning green, and from this vantage point, in spite of everything we may have been taught, harmony and beauty - *not* conflict and desolation - seem to be at the heart of things.

This reading of nature, with its contrasting themes of conflict and harmony, paired together in a *sequence* of understanding, is captured perfectly in the beautiful landscape paintings of the Hudson River School. Through a lifetime of devotion to their art, Thomas Cole and his contemporaries achieved a unique style that requires us to pay attention not just to one piece, but to a life's work, in order to see a familiar place in different ways, to think and rethink the world.

This is our task as well. If UConn is going to move to new heights, we, too, must pay attention and think about the familiar in *unfamiliar* ways – in ways that may be at odds with the customs and habits acquired when UConn was a smaller, sleepier place, in ways that see cooperation and common purpose where we once saw conflict and isolation as the status quo of academic life.

In short, I challenge us to be different and to see our world as Emerson saw his, where success is defined not only in the fragments but in the whole, and where the guiding principle is *not* conflict, but unity. As Emerson writes in his poem “Woodnotes II,”

*The wood and wave each other know
Not unrelated, unaffied,
But to each thought and thing allied,
Is perfect Nature's every part,
Rooted in the mighty Heart.*

In a very basic way, this spirit of unity is already much rooted in the mighty heart of UConn. It's part of our university motto, *robur*, which is the Latin word for “strength” and which captures the familiar notion that in unity there is strength.

That notion should be on our minds today as we map our future together. Where we've previously seen the pieces, I ask that we see the whole; to imagine the possibilities of collaboration, and to turn those possibilities into real strategies, real partnerships, and ultimately real successes in which we can all take pride. I ask that we join together to think about our duties in more cohesive ways. And I ask that we work together to establish a solid union of our departments, colleges and campuses and to build an academic culture that will support this union, because in unity we will discover our true strength – our ability not just to “get by,” but to move forward through the changing landscape of higher education in the 21st century. Let's participate together in defining and *making* that change, and not be content to sit back and be made *by* it.

Now I realize that my job at this point is to convince you that what I'm saying up here is more than just “talk”; because, as Theodore Roosevelt said, “Rhetoric is a poor substitute for action... If we are really to be a great nation,” he added, “we must not merely talk; we must *act*.” And act “big.”

I agree. If we're to be a truly great university, our ideas have to be matched by actions. So let me tell you about some of our ideas and, more importantly, about some of the things we're already *doing* as we begin our run to the top.

In building strength through unity, the first big step is really a psychological one. For those of us who are members of the faculty, we need to rethink what we've learned. Starting in graduate school, then up through the tenure and promotion process with building urgency, and then into our careers as seasoned faculty members, we learn, and then impress upon those who follow us, that academic life *is* research, teaching, and service. If higher education has a cross-cutting motto, it is research, teaching, and service.

I won't be saying here that we need to do away with these mainstays of academic life – far from it – but I do believe that it's time to rethink research, teaching, and service in serious ways. In particular, we've learned to think too much in terms of *my* research, *my* teaching, and *my* service. We can't move to the next level of prominence if we continue to look inward, in self-driven and competitive ways, for a sense of purpose and value as members of what's really a university community. We need to look outward as well, and we need to be doing it together. We need to start looking beyond the walls of our offices, beyond our own disciplines, departments, and colleges, and start thinking instead of *our* research together, *our* teaching together, and *our* service together as we strive to build an academic world that is more integrated and collaborative.

Let's start with *research* and graduate education. And first let's take a minute to congratulate ourselves. Many of you already know of our strengths in some of the core disciplines and of our rising strengths in Pharmacy, Law, and just about everything in the Neag School of Education. But did you know of our interdisciplinary strengths? Did you know, for example, that we have a growing expertise in environmental research, material science, nanotechnology, and stem-cell research; or that we're making landmark contributions to health and human behavior across our campuses; or that we have a signature cross-disciplinary program in the new field of human rights?

Did you know that only four percent of higher education institutions in the United States have the high honor of being identified by the Carnegie Foundation as “Doctoral/Research-Extensive Universities”; and did you know that UConn is one of them? Last year, thanks to the efforts of our faculty, staff, and students, almost 200 million dollars in external funds flowed into the university, with about half going to Storrs and the regional campuses, and the other half going to the Health Center in Farmington. According to a recent National Science Foundation report on research and development spending, we rank 78th out of 640 institutions nationwide, and 54th out of 381 public institutions.

So, we have a good research enterprise at UConn, supported by some good graduate programs; but what can we do to make it better? Well, once again we can take a lesson from springtime in Storrs: Where we looked once and saw conflict, we can look again and see cooperation. You may have heard it said that the future of research is “big science,” which today means cross-disciplinary, multi-person, and multi-institutional teams working *together* on important intellectual and practical problems. The National Academy of Sciences recently published a report on *Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research*. The U.S. Senate wants to know more about how the National Science Foundation is supporting interdisciplinary research. The so-called “Roadmap” of the National Institutes of Health is an integrated vision – an *integrated* vision – that aims to deepen our

understanding of biology, reshape clinical research, and accelerate medical discovery, all by stimulating *interdisciplinary* research teams, and all with the goal of improving the health and well-being of people everywhere. And these are just a few examples.

The upshot is this: growing our research enterprise, particularly in the area of sponsored research, means more cross-disciplinary collaboration, especially around our areas of excellence. This does not mean that we'll be shortchanging traditional disciplines, which, after all, form the basis for interdisciplinary work. But at a time when resources are scarce, *it does mean* that we'll need to make strategic choices about which disciplines and research clusters offer the best prospects of success. It means rethinking the way we manage our budgeting; it means allocating and reallocating more revenues to high-priority areas. And to be successful, it means that our vision for growing the research enterprise must be shared!

[Refrain]: *It's about building strength through unity.*

I know that some of the faculty here today, not to mention our Trustees and others, might be concerned about how we're going to make this vision a reality. In the short time I've been here, I've listened to you very carefully. And because of that, I'm not going to tell you that we can build disciplinary and cross-disciplinary centers of excellence or grow our research enterprise by simply working harder. We're asking big things of you, and that means we need to do big things *for you*.

Aside from our decision to allocate more resources to high-priority areas, I'm pleased to announce that, later this week, we will unveil a draft version of our new strategic Academic Plan, which will begin to identify these high priority areas. And I'm pleased to say that in February we received approval from the Board of Trustees to move ahead with our plan for restructuring the university's top-level administration. We've created a new VP for research who will oversee research across *all* of our campuses, including the Health Center. And for the first time, the deans of all of our colleges and schools, including the Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine, will now report directly to the university provost. These two changes, as simple as they may seem, will bring all of our academic programs under one administrative umbrella and aid our efforts to eliminate barriers to cross-disciplinary teaching and research.

Most faculty members won't notice any changes in their day-to-day routine, at least not at first, but they will notice a big difference when they look to collaborate with colleagues outside their colleges or disciplines, or when they need help applying for a grant or finding funding outlets to support a new idea. They'll also start to see more joint appointments and improved systems that account for and reward cross-disciplinary efforts. And as our realignment plan goes into action, they'll find it much easier to accomplish this kind of work, which, among other things, will help us bring in more extramural funding than we already do.

Yet I want to assure you that the changes we've made to key leadership positions will do more than enhance our research mission. Beyond thinking more in terms of *our* research, *our* teaching, and *our* service, we'll need to overcome the sense that these are separate activities. They, too, are unified! Having grown up in Iowa – in the heart of the “Corn

Belt” – I find myself falling back on the old “milking stool” analogy: like a milking stool, there are three legs to the university’s mission, and if one leg is too short or is taken away, the stool falls over. The realignment plan that we just adopted isn’t naïve to this wisdom. By enhancing our research mission, we’ll also be strengthening the other two “legs” of the stool: our teaching and service missions, including our engagement with the community around us.

As far as *teaching* goes, UConn can take another minute to congratulate itself. First, we’ve got outstanding students. Today’s students are the best-prepared undergraduates in the University’s history. They are among the top-ranked students in their high school classes; and here at UConn they have a first-year retention rate of 93% and a six-year graduation rate of 74%. We have students who want to be here; students who are smart and curious and motivated.

And these students are taught, inspired, and led by faculty members who are among the most accomplished in their fields of study. Indeed, we’ve gotten where we are today through the tireless commitment and hard work of so many faculty (and, yes, let’s not forget our excellent staff as well). These faculty and staff, many now among our most senior colleagues, stuck it out through thick and thin, through good years and bad, always persevering in their search for excellence. Because of them we are one of the top 25 public universities in the country, and for nine years running *the* number-one public university in all of New England.

Today, we stand on the shoulders of these colleagues as we try to reach even higher. We’ve got great programs, but we can still do better! At the undergraduate level, we need to expand our honors program, create more living and learning communities, and offer students more opportunities to study abroad and to collaborate with faculty on research projects. At the graduate and professional level, we need to have more programs ranked in the top 25 among all public universities, and we need to get them there while maintaining the strong undergraduate base we’ve built.

Our new budgeting policies, the strategic Academic Plan we are about to unveil, and our restructuring of key leadership positions will play a major role in helping us achieve these goals by allowing us to coordinate our academic and research efforts more effectively and to commit a greater portion of our resources to our most important priorities. We’ll also be able to provide graduate and undergraduate students with valuable cross-disciplinary learning opportunities and research experiences. And by providing more of these experiences, and by aligning our research and teaching missions across all of our campuses – we’ll better prepare our undergraduate students as tomorrow’s top civic and economic leaders; our professional students as tomorrow’s change agents in healthcare, business, law, government, and social services; and our graduate students as tomorrow’s leaders in scientific discovery and creative endeavor.

[Refrain]: *Again, it’s about building strength through unity.*

This brings us to the last leg of the stool: outreach and public engagement, which is part of our important service mission. In rethinking research, teaching, and service, we must always remember that we’re a land- and sea-grant institution, and such institutions were

created to be *useful* to society, whatever else they do. It's just as important now as it was in UConn's early history, that we not forget the people we serve off campus, as well as on. Doing more to combine and coordinate education and research along the lines that I'm suggesting will help us to see the ways in which we're *already* most useful and to imagine how we might leverage our areas of excellence to forge new collaborations with partners in the private sector and in other areas of government.

In higher education today, there is little place for the old adage, "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches." Today, for those of us who work on both sides of the narrowing academic-industrial divide, making a distinction between "doers" and "teachers" is fast becoming anachronistic thinking. We have an interest in helping the state grow economically, and we will share in the benefits of that growth. It goes without saying: we need each other.

On our end, we must continue to foster the already-positive relationships we have with Connecticut's political and governmental leaders, who have done so much to support us. Thanks to their efforts over the past decade – in the form of UConn 2000, 21st Century UConn, the Eminent Faculty Program, the Stem Cell Initiative, the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, and ongoing annual general fund support – UConn is now a top choice for an increasing number of Connecticut's highest achieving students, who used to leave the state for their education! When any of us meets the Governor of our state, who is here with us today, or any of our state legislators, some of whom are also with us today, we need to thank them for their support, because we would not be where we are today, and where we're going tomorrow, without them.

Nor should we forget to thank our alumni and donors, a number of whom are with us today. They, too, helped to get us where we are, and we're grateful for that. We hope they'll continue to stay in touch in the years ahead, because we cannot get ahead without their loyalty and support.

I trust that our alumni are as honored as we are to see their university giving back to the communities and people who have given so much to us. Today UConn is graduating a record number of students, and during their time here we've helped them explore service-learning opportunities and do volunteer work in their communities. Taken together, these young professionals constitute the new generation of Connecticut's "intellectual capital," as it's sometimes called. They represent the University's unique and greatest contribution to the state's economic, cultural, and community well-being. At the same time, however, we also support the state by commercializing the intellectual property we cultivate and by collaborating with allies in the commercial sector who can take what we've developed and start new businesses.

We need more of these fruitful collaborations and partnerships. We need more because the Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis has shown us that, through multiplier effects, research and development funds coming into UConn in a single year lead to over 5,000 new jobs, nearly \$400 million in new Gross State Product, and nearly \$300 million in new personal income each year over the long run! And we'll be able to achieve even more, and give back even more, as we work to align our research, teaching, and outreach missions across our campuses.

[Refrain]: *Once again, it's about building strength through unity.*

With that in mind, let me leave you with this. I invite you to activate your imaginations with me. We may look once and see a university where units are isolated from one another and in a state of perpetual conflict. We may look once and see a “zero sum” game, a war of all against all – with no unifying structures; no one speaking for the whole; with redundancies and waste and inefficient use of limited resources. But look again! See everything in unfamiliar terms. Paint in your mind a place that promotes collaboration and the sharing of valuable resources. In this kind of university – the one we’re building – the whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts. I believe this is what we need and want. Remember: the rising tide lifts all boats. Imagine us among the top 20 public research universities in the country, and recall that all good things flow to highly ranked, highly performing institutions, including better students, higher retention and graduation rates, better placements for our graduates, more grants and research awards for our faculty, better service to our state, and much, much more.

We can’t get there without you, of course. Changes such as the ones we’re initiating aren’t successful if they come crashing down from the top. But thankfully, each word I’ve spoken today was inspired by thousands more that came from you – from your e-mails, from your letters, from your phone calls, from the many conversations we’ve had, and from our meetings together. The big ideas we’ve come up with and the changes we’ve initiated – some of which I’ve told you about today – are really an echo in response to your chorus. My voice, speaking for the whole, is not my voice. It is your voice. It is our voice, together. It’s the voice through which the strength of unity sings.

Thank you for your ideas and inspiration. Thank you for being here today. Thank you for the honor of serving this great institution.

