STATE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS ADDRESS TO THE ACADEMIC SENATE
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Colleagues, last year in my annual report before this respected academic body, I urged each of us to reach beyond our grasp to find ways to make this good university a great one. I urged us to think boldly about the IU South Bend of the future and to think creatively about our identity, and to dare to be great. To do this well and to fulfill our dreams, I cautioned that we must be vigilant and remain faithful to our public mission. A year later, I want to propose pragmatic suggestions about how we take firm steps that move us from good toward great. But before doing so, allow me to digress for a brief moment.

The historic events of the last few weeks jolted me and pulled me back to the sweltering summer of 1963 in New Orleans. Rapt with an idealism fueled by the injustices of segregation, I spent summer days with a group of other teenagers, teaching elderly black men and women, the preamble to the Constitution so that they would be eligible for voter registration. Each Monday afternoon, dozens of elderly men and women were bused to City Hall and often turned away because of a slight mistake in their recitation of the preamble. Many endured the ignominious insult of being called girl or boy. So many were turned away that in our frustration, and in our resolve to eliminate this injustice, we began to march daily in front of City Hall, and each day we were hauled away in police cars or paddy wagons. But in the memory of those determined and courageous men and women, who repeatedly presented themselves before the Registrar of Voters, on the night of November 4th I quietly, and tearfully, applauded President-Elect Obama’s victory as theirs. No matter your party affiliation, I trust that you, like me, can take enormous pride in the progression of our country over the last few decades.

Moments like the one just mentioned, whether they are from a distant or near past, link us to the contemporary issues of our time, and ultimately shape our world-view. And there are undoubtedly important lessons in recent events for our students as well. In thinking about their place in history and what they will carry forward, I am compelled to think that if there ever were iron-clad reasons for higher education, now is the time. Now is the time to engage our university with its public, to connect it to the needs of our society. Now is the time to re-affirm our commitment to use our capital resources and our intellectual vigor not only in service to our community, but also to assure that each of our students has every opportunity to make real their dreams. How best to accomplish this, I have no simple answer other than to say, yes, we can.

Part of the answer is already laid out for us by the Indiana Commission of Higher Education in its report, Reaching Higher: Strategic Initiatives for Higher Education, which details specific roles and strategic directions for Indiana’s public universities and colleges. The commissioners who recently visited campus made clear that for the state of Indiana to be more competitive in the global market, more of its citizens need higher education. Currently, our state ranks forty-fourth in the number of its residents with an associates or baccalaureate degree. Economic growth and quality of life for both individuals and communities are intricately linked to higher education. It is no small wonder then that the Commission is pushing an aggressive agenda for higher education that is more streamlined and more
transparent, that educates the most citizens in the most financially efficacious manner. In that spirit, the Commission’s report is a template for higher education delivery that defines specific roles for the community college, the research university and the regional campus. For regional campuses, like ours, it is abundantly clear that funding and the ability to garner new resources are closely tied to student success; that means retention (course completion) and time to degree (graduation rate). These two terms are the core of the Commission’s charge to us.

What the Commission has outlined is a formula for IU South Bend to achieve distinction, to move along the path of good to great. Indisputably, the Commission’s report is a coherent plan for higher education in Indiana that allows access and success for every resident in our region. There is opportunity in the challenges ahead. What kind of university are we on this 21st day of November? How will we be judged twenty-five years from now? With urgency and with deliberate speed, I invite us to define the strategic educational agenda that will shape the soul and define the public purpose of IU South Bend and make real the promises of higher education to the citizens of Michiana. Thomas Jefferson felt that a new Constitution should be drawn for every generation. Similarly, we might argue, that every twenty-five years or so, a university should re-create itself. In many ways we do this, not episodically but routinely, through the shared governance of program reviews, assessment, curriculum development, environmental scanning and planning. But the pressures of our historical moment, the needs of our community, the individuality of our students, and the guidelines of the Commission could – should – provoke us into a more focused set of reflections, deliberations and actions. This is not a time for the slow unfolding of the status quo. That is not the path to greatness.

And like any good university, we do progress. Certainly, incremental steps have been made in each academic unit since my last address to you. I’ll report what I think has been accomplished in the December VCAA Newsletter. In the last year, I’ve thought continuously about how a university moves from good to great. I made valiant efforts to cast aside troglodytic thinking and focused on 21st century possibilities. For if it is worth doing, then, yes we can. I take liberty now in offering five pragmatic measures that I believe will determine if we remain a good university or become one of distinction; they are student success, undergraduate research, community engagement, global education, and diversity. Let me address them individually.

**Student success:** Since the arrival of our chancellor six years ago, we have come to understand that we are champions of recruitment and retention. Through the Degrees of Excellence program President McRobbie has made retention an area of emphasis for all of IU campuses. For the next five years one percent of our annual budget is allocated toward retention. Through the ICHE report, Reaching Higher, we now know that future funding from the state will depend on course completions and graduation rates. Currently, the attrition rate from first to second year is approximately thirty percent; our four year graduation rate is six percent; the six year rate, twenty-seven percent. Clearly, these statistics go against the grain of cost efficiencies and do not serve well the economic interests of our region. Nevertheless, IU South Bend can become known for a climate of student success. How do we achieve it? We know there is a strong correlation between academic success and student engagement. When students are connected to faculty, to staff, to other students, to classes and extra-curricular activities, they stay in school and are more likely to gain more from their college experience. Therefore, I propose that IU South Bend establish Learning Communities as a marker of excellence. There are two
types of learning communities I would like for us to consider; first, a learning community comprised of linked courses; second, a learning community arising from central themes, topics, or the academic major. We already have in place the beginnings of a learning community in U100, the Degrees of Excellence initiative under the tutelage of Randy Isaacson. The early evidence suggests that students in this course are more likely to persist. However, I’d like to expand that concept and strongly urge that U100 be paired with W130 and M014, or possibly with courses in history or philosophy. Scheduling courses in a way that puts students in the same classroom sets the stage for building community. The success of any learning community requires coordination and implementation, and would need the assistance of highly qualified peer mentors working with professors. Increased institutional aid for these high ability students will help build a cadre of peer mentors working hand in hand with professors in building a distinct identity for learning communities.

We should also develop selected Learning Communities around central themes, activities, or the academic major. As provost at another university, I convened ten groups, each comprised of ten students and two faculty facilitators. The groups met once a week to discuss readings around a common theme. My group, assisted by an art professor, read and studied the essays of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the South African writer, Nadine Gordimer. It was a powerful bonding experience that harnessed the intellectual capital of faculty and students; but the wonderful by-product of the groups was that it created community. There is abundant research that affirms that students belonging to a community are more likely to persist and succeed. At IU South Bend, I envision both credit and non-credit learning communities developed around a common cluster of courses or a central theme. These learning communities could be defined by space, such as a learning community for residence hall students, a learning community for computer science students, or biology students. Themed learning communities on sustainability, the Constitution, democracy and politics, faith and politics, the economics of poverty, war and economics, aging and health care policy, or renewable energy and environmental health are possibilities. To do these well requires that we re-shape the curriculum and co-curricular offerings in order to take advantage of the retention traits we associate with learning communities.

Undergraduate research: Our students have important aspirations and dreams of what higher education promises; their IU South Bend diploma is their ticket to a good job and improved life conditions. Our responsibility is to help and encourage them along the way. They may not fully realize, however, that the lifeline of a university is research. But we realize it, and that is why another marker of excellence for our university should be undergraduate research. I’m not talking about undergraduate research for the select few. We need to think bigger and include as many students as possible. At a Southern private university, twenty-five percent of undergraduates co-author research papers with their faculty. Through undergraduate research, I want our students to understand the bigger picture, to learn how we think about and approach our academic disciplines. As they gain in knowledge, and in the process sharpen their analytical and intuitive skills, they will acquire the tools for a lifetime of discovery. Yes, in thinking about the singular ways we educate students for success, we can be that special place, where their initiation into a defined research project makes all the difference in the ways they learn and in how they approach problems and reach solutions.

Community engagement: As it progresses from good to great, IU South Bend will be known for its community engagement. The academic programs of the schools of Business and Economics, Educa-
tion and Nursing and Health Professions already align with the community through internships and practica, targeted student projects, service learning, entrepreneurship and faculty consulting. The newly established Center for a Sustainable Future is already providing leadership in the area of sustainable living. Working with community agencies and civic leaders in the education and promotion of a green economy, IU South Bend in its public purpose can be a regional leader in the development of alternative and sustainable life choices. The center’s director, Mike Keen has been actively engaged working with civic and industry leaders on sustainable living. Last night at the invitation of the Chamber of Commerce, he spoke at a community forum on environmental stewardship. This morning he is a presenter at the WVPE Sustainable Business Roundtable, a forum for leaders in business, industry, education and community. Efforts like these make IU South Bend a community leader and are a clear example of our public mission and a model of engaged professorship.

The Natatorium, a building once slated for destruction, because it symbolized for many a shameful past, has been resurrected as a community and education center that will serve as a focal point for the activities of the Civil Rights Heritage Center. The Natatorium’s primary function will be community engagement using lessons learned from the Civil Rights Movement to teach civic and social responsibility, leadership, activism, and community engagement. Student groups will visit the Natatorium to learn these key lessons but also to learn of Northern Indiana’s troubled racial history. Neighborhood and church groups will gather there to dialogue and to seek solutions on critical issues affecting their communities. Again, this is how a public university like IU South Bend engages the citizens of its region. Examples like these need to be commonplace among our programs and faculty.

**Diversity:** IU South Bend’s mission statement affirms its commitment to diversity. For many successive years, the university has brought together renowned scholars and public figures to examine and discuss the significant issues of race and class. With success, inevitably change follows. And although we were pioneers in developing diversity programming, Conversations on Race and the Black Man’s Think Tank have run their course and will be discontinued. Rather than despair, let’s consider their demise as new opportunities to engage our university and external communities. President McRobbie’s initiatives on diversity and the state legislature’s mandate to create a diversity committee on each IU campus afford us the chance to re-think our own commitment to diversity. A newly established diversity committee, co-chaired by Becky Torstrick and Deidra Turner, has the task of monitoring the university’s commitment to diversity as well as re-shaping diversity programming. Already, the campus has been presented the occasion to engage the university and the community in dialogue about race and class through a defined curriculum called “Study Circles.” In the coming weeks you may be invited to help shape the program and/or become an active participant. To claim greatness, IU South Bend should be a welcoming campus where minorities and disadvantaged persons persist and excel.

**Global education:** Universities of distinction educate their students to be world citizens. So must IU South Bend. President McRobbie’s desire to expand international study and research is at the center of his vision for Indiana University. Our own plan must be no less ambitious. Increasingly, more students are participating in our study abroad programs in Mexico, France, Germany and England, Central and Latin America. Letters and diaries from students affirm life-changing experiences. International student exchanges and regularly admitted international students bring a world flavor to our campus. Their customs and traditions are an open laboratory that enriches the lives of our Michiana
students. They in turn learn and grow from the American experience. The great university of the future will find the resources to send more students and faculty abroad.

In sum, my response to what I have just detailed is yes, we can. I do not suggest that these examples are the only paths for our university to move from good to great. But surely, you agree that if we achieved these five goals we'd be moving steadily toward greatness. We'd become known across the country as an exemplary regional university. To be known as a campus focused on student success, the undergraduate experience, community engagement, diversity and global education requires the collective energy and creativity in this room. I welcome your input and encourage you to join with me and other faculty and administrative colleagues in developing what I've outlined this morning. We are the villagers that raise the university. Academics is the heart and soul of what a university is, but in order for academics to flourish, it requires the embrace of all sectors of the university, and for that we are all grateful to the services provided by our colleagues in Student Affairs, Administrative and Fiscal Affairs, Public Affairs and University Advancement, Information Technology and for the leadership of our chancellor.

I sincerely thank each of you, and best wishes for an excellent academic year and a hearty feast this holiday with family and friends.