

Castleton

A V E R M O N T S T A T E C O L L E G E

“Taking Action”

Inaugural Remarks
President David S. Wolk
September 26, 2002

Governor Dean, Lt. Governor Racine, Senator Stafford, Governor Salmon (there could not be better friends of Vermont higher education than the four of you), members of the Vermont State Colleges Board of Trustees, Chancellor Clarke, faculty and colleagues, honored guests and, most importantly, Castleton students.

Thank you so much, Governor Dean. We are grateful to you for more than eleven years of dedicated and distinguished service as our Governor, and I am honored that you are here. After all these many years together, and because of our wonderful friendship that we have shared over this time, I do have one question for you: Who would have thought that I would get to be President before you?

I was wondering why colleges and universities wait so long to inaugurate new Presidents. Most wait a year. Frankly, I figured that Castleton scheduled this Inauguration, with all its attendant pomp and circumstance, ten months after my arrival, just to make sure that I would still be on the job. Thanks for waiting.

And thank you to all of my colleagues here at Castleton who have invested so much time and effort in the festivities around the Inauguration. I very much appreciate it.

At this point in Castleton’s proud history that reaches back to 1787, and with a collective eye toward the college’s growth and prosperity over the next five years, it is time for us to take stock and to take action.

Taking action presumes that one will take some well-calculated risks. What does it mean to take a risk?

In August 1948, a young man sought parental favor in asking his girlfriend's father for her hand in marriage. They had dated for only three weeks. In a carefully designed plan to curry favor with his hoped for fiancée's father, this nervous 28 year old waited until her father was watching a professional baseball game in his favorite room, sitting on his favorite chair, watching on a small round television with a barely discernible picture. What was clear, however, was that the Brooklyn Dodgers were playing the New York Giants. As this anxious prospective son-in-law entered the room, not really knowing how to broach the subject, he stammered, and then finally observed to the potential father of the bride: I sure hope whichever team you're rooting for is winning.

I am grateful that my father, who is here this afternoon with my mother, took that risk in 1948. By the way, if he had not done so, you would have been spared this speech today.

We do need to take risks and we need to take action if we are to move thoughtfully and strategically into the future.

First and foremost, and very simply, we must remain a small college with a big heart.

To do this, we must always retain that which makes Castleton special: a place where learning is valued; a place where classes are taught by well educated and compassionate professors who know and care about each and every one of their students; a place where diversity is honored, individual differences are valued, and mutual respect dignifies our community; a place where students maximize their potential and imagine new horizons and contemplate the meaning of life and explore higher purposes and pursue community service; a place where students prepare themselves for ever changing careers, knowing that learning a living is as important as earning a living; and a place where the love of learning means that students are educated to a point beyond which they educate themselves. All of this makes Castleton special. This is what flourishes in our small college with a big heart.

Furthermore, we must continue to invest in improving academic quality at Castleton. The academic readiness of our incoming students is on the rise. The quality and diversity of our academic programs must continue to improve. That means that we must support our students and our faculty in collective scholarship, and we must provide our faculty with all the resources they need to do their jobs well. We must compensate them fairly and well. We must strengthen our academic programs. Academic quality must be our top priority.

At the same time, we must remember our mission, and that of all of the Vermont State Colleges,

to serve Vermont. We must continue to enhance education and training opportunities for Vermonters. We are becoming respected partners in improving our schools, through our education programs, the new and successful Woodruff Institute for School Leaders, and the initiation of our new Castleton Center for Schools, increasing opportunities for undergraduate and graduate education for thousands of future Vermont educators. We are doing our part in meeting the needs of our state in addressing the growing nursing shortage, with new programs in the Northeast Kingdom and soon in eastern Vermont as well as in the Rutland region.

We must continue to explore new ways to benefit Vermont. Although only one-fifth of our college budget comes directly from the state of Vermont, it is still our duty as a public college to serve Vermonters.

Second, we must ensure that our financial house remains in order. We must maintain the college on a secure and responsible financial footing, with strategic expenditures in a fiscal environment that fosters enhanced accountability as well as innovation. We must maximize our revenues from a variety of sources, including new and better efforts related to fund raising, grant writing, entrepreneurship, and alumni connections. Given our limited level of state support, as well as the need to maintain tuition costs at reasonable levels, it is incumbent upon the college, and especially me, to maximize external funding. At the same time, we must be carefully deliberate about any new spending. I will not be distracted from our mission to serve our students and to serve Vermont.

Third, we must focus on recruitment, but also retention, of the most capable and promising new students, as we improve the quality of our campus life. That means that for our commuters as well as our residents we must support campus programs and activities, and we must invent new ones, including a stronger athletic program open to more students and offering more sports options, to better meet the needs and interests of today's students.

This year we have our largest number of new students in almost twenty years. Our overall enrollment is climbing. We need to make sure that these higher numbers of students will enjoy the many and varied benefits of their education, and that they will succeed in earning their degrees. These capable and promising students will be very involved in helping us improve the quality of academic and community life on this campus. As I told our students in January: you can make a difference in this college before you go out to make a difference in the world.

Fourth, we must improve the physical attractiveness of our campus. We are embarking upon a campus-wide long-term Master Planning effort that will result in improvements to college buildings, facilities, and walkways. Campus beautification projects, renovations in the library

and in Woodruff and Leavenworth halls, new signage on and off campus, and development of an innovative and exemplary new Student Services Center are projects that are already underway.

Over the next five years we will need to focus on three other major capital improvement projects that deserve our immediate attention. First, we will need to increase our residence hall capacity, not only because our current residence halls are overflowing, but also because existing residences need to be modernized. Second, we need to improve our athletic facilities, including the development of a state of the art fitness center. Third, we need to fund fine arts center renovations, including the replacement of seating and installation of new carpeting. We will look to the state for assistance with these projects, but we will also expand our private fund-raising in order to do what is right for our students and what is right for Vermont.

So what about taking a risk?

The most dangerous risk we could take is one that we will not take, and that is to do nothing, with the college maintaining the status quo by sailing along according to the prevailing winds of the time. We have been there and done that.

Instead, over the next several years we need to plan and dream for the future and to act upon those plans and dreams with all due diligence.

We will take action. We will do it together, thoughtfully and strategically over the next few years, and we will do it well.

We will have a Master Plan. We will raise money. We will serve Vermont. We will invest in our faculty and in academic quality improvements. We will attract very good students who we can help to become very good citizens. We will enhance student activities and programs, including the arts as well as athletics. We will continue to beautify the campus. We will improve our buildings and facilities. We will support our students, our faculty, and all of our employees.

Finally, and most importantly, we will remember the higher purposes of learning as well as the beauty of community, and we will preserve all that is special about our beloved Castleton—the small college with the big heart.

Let's take action together, and let's make history.

Thank you.