

**FALL 2009 CONVOCATION  
OCTOBER 14, 2009**

Good afternoon. And thank you for being here. Normally, when I thank people for attending an event at Mason, I do so on behalf of the university. But all of you are the university. It is you who do research, who teach, work in your labs, your offices and your cubicles who keep the university moving. It is you who deal with the calls from our neighbors, solve the day-to-day problems of our students, fix the computers, jump start the telephones, clear the traffic jams, sweep the walkways and parking lots, adjust the heat or air conditioning dials in our facilities, represent our institution, and often times directly bear the brunt of the frustrations and complaints that come from working at an institution with a population of students and employees that now exceeds 37,000 people.

Not a day passes when I and those with whom I most often interact don't appreciate your work ethic, your dedication, and the fruits of your effort. A walk around each of our campuses is proof enough of the consistently outstanding service you provide. Looking back at various outreach activities and events we have undertaken recently, I am reminded of the many descriptive words that people used to describe us: agile, creative, great investment, good value, entrepreneurial, effective, leading. It is no coincidence that these words can be used to describe so many of you. As a result, despite our challenging times, I am proud to report that the vital signs of George Mason University are strong. And I am equally proud to acknowledge that, in large measure, the reasons for that are because of all of you. Thank you for all that you do each and every day.

I want to recognize our new faculty, staff members and administrators who are with us today. Would all of you who are with us today be rise so that we may acknowledge you? **(President Merten leads audience in applause.)**.....Thank you and welcome.

Also, I wish to acknowledge those student leaders and dignitaries from our surrounding community who are with us today. Please rise. **(President Merten leads audience in applause.)**.....Thank you for taking time from your busy schedules to be with us today.

We have much to celebrate here at George Mason. And I want to speak of that. But, first, let me address two particular issues that have been on all our minds: our budget and student enrollment.

First, the budget. It is, for all of us, the 800-pound gorilla around which our day-to-day activities and our planning for the future revolve. Virginia has been experiencing a severe revenue shortfall. Last month the governor announced a new round of budget cuts. He directed reductions in the operating budgets of all state agencies, including public colleges and universities. At Mason, the result is a reduction of \$17.5 million or approximately 15 per cent from our operating fund for this fiscal year. This means in the past year and a half we have had over \$45 million taken from our budget; money that will probably not be replaced. And while federal funds ease the pain this year and next, the cuts are still severe and the band aid is temporary.

The totality of these cuts are significant. This will require sacrifice on the part of all of us. It will mean reductions in a range of areas, including not filling vacancies for many research, staff and faculty positions; reducing IT contracts; deferring non-personal

spending for conferences, travel, equipment and training; and identifying ways to streamline and possibly even realign administrative services. Further, it is very likely that all state workers will be furloughed for one day over the next ten months. A final determination on this will be made sometime soon.

These latest cuts make the prospects of cost-of-living adjustments for George Mason any time before 2011 very slim. I know how frustrating this budget situation is for all of you. I also know it is very unfair, particularly when the quality of your overall work continues to be so high and because the state is so dependent on the work that Mason does in helping meet the educational needs of so many Virginians and in contributing to the economic and social engine of Virginia and far beyond. This is why we at Mason are working actively with the state toward improving general support and salaries. I cannot promise or guarantee any results from this ongoing dialog, but I can assure you that this remains a priority of ours for next year and beyond.

Morrie Scherrens, our senior vice president and Peter Stearns, our provost, have conducted several town hall meetings on the budget and will continue to do so as we receive additional information. Also, we want to continue giving you opportunities to voice your own concerns and ask questions. I echo what Morrie and Peter have said before: as we continue to move our institution forward, your input is important. We welcome your ideas and your questions.

Economic hardship is not new to us. In fact, it has been a constant part of our institution's history. Mason has consistently been among the lowest and, at times, the lowest funded doctoral institutions in Virginia. Yet in our institution's young history, one

trait we have exhibited time after time is a determination to be a leader in what we do and in how we do it.

Our institution became free-standing in 1972. At that time, there were many in the general assembly who agreed to this decision on the assumption we would operate as a small liberal arts college. But our own early leaders had a different vision – a vision that carries on to this day. We rejected the notion of positioning ourselves as simply another ivory tower. Instead, we began moving in the direction of helping Northern Virginia evolve into an economic and cultural powerhouse by integrating ourselves into the workings and goals of our surrounding neighbors and beyond.

The growth in size, quality and reputation of our institution and our region have been the subject of much attention over the past 37 years. All of us know the story well. It is why we take great pride in this institution. At the same time, we recognize that our journey has not always been easy. Since the early 1980s, Mason and our sister institutions have been hit with significant budget cuts six times due to a series of revenue shortfalls in Virginia. As a way of dealing with these challenges, the state began making decisions to reduce the amount of support it provides its colleges and universities. The fallout of this trend has been quite stark.

In 2001, less than ten years ago, the state provided us with over 60 per cent of our academic budget. This year, that total has dropped below 30 per cent. The dwindling state support is one of the factors we assess in our annual deliberations on whether to raise tuition and fees and by how much.

Earlier, I alluded to the steady rise in our student enrollment. There has been no change in that trend this year. We all have noticed and felt the presence of more students

on campus. This is not your imagination. This semester we surpassed our fall enrollment target by 1,500 students. This puts our total enrollment at 32,500, the largest in our institution's history.

Each year, our enrollment officials determine enrollment targets based upon institutional historical data for new students as well as retention rates for existing students. This time around we enrolled about 1,000 more undergraduate students and 500 more graduate students than targeted. These higher numbers are due to a larger freshmen class, a greater number of transfer students, a higher retention of students, particularly at the sophomore to junior level, and more graduate students.

It is interesting to note that those academic programs geared toward high-need workforce areas such as teaching, the health professions, engineering and information technology surpassed their enrollment targets by nearly ten per cent.

In terms of new first-time freshmen, we are three per cent over target. Nearly 80 per cent of freshmen are in-state and over half are from Northern Virginia. It is also interesting to note that the number for first-time freshmen in the Honors College doubled.

Regarding transfer students, we surpassed our target by 14 per cent. 70 per cent of Mason's 2,600 transfer students are from two-year institutions and 30 per cent are from four-year institutions, including a large number of transfers from many of our sister institutions in Virginia.

In terms of retention, rates are up over the fall 2008 numbers for almost every level of student. This increase accounts for about 500 more undergraduate students than projected. The most encouraging trend here is the significant increase in the sophomore to junior retention rate at Mason.

What do these higher numbers mean? To begin, it speaks to an increased recognition of the growing overall reputation of our institution. The outreach efforts of our admissions and university relations teams are paying off in terms of enhancing our institution's visibility and also promoting the high quality of our numerous academic programs and the outstanding scholars who teach them.

The increased numbers also mean more people on our campuses, more cars in our lots, larger classes, more residential students, and more students in need of our various services such as counseling, the health clinic, career services, the library, and the guidance of their advisors. I recognize the extra burden this may place on many of you. I appreciate what you are doing on the institution's behalf. In carrying out your responsibilities, you are serving the larger calling of Mason: to help meet the educational goals of students and, as a result, play a key role in producing future contributors to the betterment of our region and our world. The value of what you do, as a collective body, cannot be understated.

Despite the recent budget reductions and the challenges of our unanticipated enrollment increase, you continue to demonstrate great creativity and leadership. In the face of these fiscal hurdles, our institution's vital signs are strong. There are far too many examples at which to point of individuals and offices and academic units taking steps to institute improvements in their own effectiveness, to be innovative, and to better guide students and better serve our university's many publics. Let me share a few examples with you:

- University Police have adopted a Police Cadet Program for students wishing to pursue careers in law enforcement. This initiative is funded by student fees, is not

part of the educational and general fund, and is already saving us thousands of dollars.

- The Volgeneau School of Information Technology and Engineering is making distance learning a priority. It is allowing students who work in the area but have trouble breaking away from their offices to take classes during the day.
- The College of Visual and Performing Arts and Patriot Center are collaborating to make greater use of the Center for the Arts during stretches of time in the year when that facility is underutilized. This should generate additional revenue for us.
- Student Health Services is making itself more accessible to students by offering clinics and free HIV testing at each of our campuses. The result of this expansion, which is done without increasing the size of the health center's staff, is an increase in the number of students who are treated each year.
- The College of Education and Human Development is launching a Leadership Institute designed to provide on-the-job training opportunities for school principals.
- The College of Health and Human Services has launched a plan to expand the number of full-time equivalent students by 100 per year over the next five years.
- School of Management has instituted a more seamless linkage of procurement and financial processing that enables those making purchases to do so entirely on-line in helping the Northern Virginia region continue to evolve into an economic and cultural powerhouse.

These best practices represent a continuation of how it has always been at George Mason. Our institution's commitment to excellence, innovation, leadership, charting our own course, and going beyond the expectations of others are what drives us. Inadequate budget support and limited space are viewed as realities with which to contend and not as stop or even yield signs to use as excuses to maintain the status quo or compromise our quest toward greatness. Those examples represent what we do and what we will continue to do.

Our institution will never allow itself to be defined by age or the size of its budget. If others wish to label us, then let them do so by our ongoing growth; our regional, national and international partnerships; the quality of our students; our institutional spirit and energy; our dedicated and excellent faculty and staff.

The first seeds of our institution were planted in 1957 when we were created as a two-year satellite campus of the University of Virginia. It has been over a half century since those early days and yet around the country many are now calling us "up and coming." Think about that. How many 52-year-old "up and comers" do you know?

Complementing these initiatives and others like them are our growing spires of excellence that reflect the quality of our academics. They include law, biomedical research, geosciences, history and new media, dance, industrial psychology, computational social sciences, special education, and creative writing. Emerging spires of excellence include public health, undergraduate research, biomedical technology and neuroscience, music education, and globalization research and education.

Much like Mason, they are reality-driven. These areas speak to specific needs of our region and country as well to real-world challenges. They have emerged despite the

economic challenges we face. The spires of excellence and the initiatives I shared with you are strong indicators that our vital signs remain strong. But, not surprisingly, there are other indicators.

Over the past year our institution has been nationally and internationally recognized for its quality, innovation and level of productivity. Here are some of the more notable accolades we have received:

- According to US News and World Report magazine, Mason remains one of the top up and coming schools in the nation to watch.
- Mason is ranked in the top 100 North and Latin American universities by the Academic Ranking of World Universities that is conducted annually by Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Institute of Higher Education
- In separate reports, The Princeton Review, Kiplinger's Personal Magazine and Forbes magazine named us as one of the nation's best values in higher education.
- For the second year in a row, the American Association of Retired Persons has named us as one of the best places to work for persons 50 years of age and older. In the same area, the Chronicle of Higher Education named us as one of the "great colleges to work for."
- In a survey conducted by a Spanish research group called the Cybermetrics Lab, Mason ranked number 70 on its "webometrics" list of U.S. and Canadian universities. On the worldwide list of over 4,000 universities, Mason was ranked no. 86. The list measures the impact and performance of universities through their web presence.

We can take much pride in these accolades.

A number of years ago, it was once said that Mason is “always in a state of becoming.” The constant movement, never-ending growth, and pervasive dynamism have become part of our institution’s DNA. It is, in a unique way, our tradition. Look at the new facilities that we have just opened or will be celebrating over the next few months: the Recreation Athletic Complex, Mason Inn, Masonvale, The Arts Building, the new parking deck, and new housing. Collectively, they represent tangible steps that take us beyond anyone’s expectations. They certainly go beyond mine. I am certain if those who viewed us back in the 60s and early 70s as being little more than a small liberal arts college could see us as we are today, then they would shake their heads in wonder.

But in fairness, how could those state officials, or any of us for that matter, truly appreciate the reality that our institution would surpass 32,000 students in total enrollment this year, play host to over three million visitors during an average academic year, establish three successful campuses, and grow an alumni body with over 130,000 members? Yet here we are.

It is important for us to take a step back and look at the multiple capital projects. Why carry on with these efforts, some may ask? Others may wonder what the purpose of it all is. So what, people may ask, that Mason has housing for staff and faculty or a hotel-conference center? These are legitimate questions, particularly during a time when money is tight, jobs are hard to find and, in some cases, a challenge to hang onto.

These facilities represent a vision our institution has had since our beginnings days when we began charting our course to become a major economic force in Northern Virginia. I can tell you, for example, that the Fairfax County Economic Authority, the

City of Fairfax and our surrounding county governments are as excited about Mason Inn as we are. Mason is as much of a school for the present as we are the future. We live in the moment with the realization that how we position ourselves today defines where we will excel tomorrow.

The purpose of our growth in the form of our many capital projects is two-fold: to meet the demands of the present and to prepare for the needs of the future. The fact that our campuses are currently operating at full capacity despite our expansion illustrates the reality of the current need for what we offer. Because economic times are tough, the need for a quality education is greater than ever. To compete successfully in a global market, men and women need solid academic credentials and a reputable institution of higher learning at which to obtain them. Further, this institution must be of high quality and house scholars and professionals of equally high caliber if the programs and courses offered by the institution are to have any lasting value. For many in Northern Virginia, a growing number of men and women from throughout Virginia, others from around the country, and still others from more than 120 nations in the world, that institution is us.

Does any one among us believe this need is going to decrease in the years to come? Is the value of a higher education going to lessen over the next five or ten years? Of course not. None of us can predict the future, but what we can do is prepare for it by taking what we know from the past and present and use that information to best position ourselves for what lies ahead. The fundamental truth of Americans is that we are a people that do not stand still. The same holds true for George Mason University.

To the students who are here today but who soon will eventually move on and to those of us who remain, we help balance the challenges of today with the needs of

tomorrow. At times, that position can be complex, messy and a bit overwhelming. But it is vital to our success.

The current state of our institution speaks to our resolve to be the best we can in the face of doubt and limited resources. But the best part of our story is that our best days are still ahead. Our star remains on the ascent.

In the vital area of research, for example, for the first time in our history our institution earlier this year surpassed \$100 million in sponsored research expenditures, marking a 25 per cent growth compared to 2008 and a 45 per cent increase compared to 2007. This important upswing is testament to our institutional culture which encourages collaboration among departments. It also points to the quality, energy and dedication of our faculty.

Take the work of Lisa Pawlosky, nutritional anthropologist, and her research on child obesity in developing countries. Professor Pawlosky is working with leaders in several countries to help improve the nutritional habits of their impoverished citizens.

Professor Yuntan Wu, professor of molecular and microbiology, is working to decode the process that prepares cells for the HIV virus.

Professor Louise Shelley of the School of Public Policy is examining the impact that human trafficking has on a nation's security.

Professor Giorgio Ascoli of the Krasnow Institute is working to understand how the human brain works. Potentially, the findings of his research could have biomedical implications in the study and treatment of epilepsy, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

Financially, things for us may be tight but we are nonetheless rich with an outstanding faculty. Their commitment to research and to teaching continues to make a

tangible difference in educating students who will eventually leave us and use what they have learned at Mason for the betterment of our region, our country and our world.

Not too long ago, I took my predecessor, George Johnson, on a tour of the Fairfax campus to let him see the many changes that are taking place here. He was flabbergasted at what he saw. And for those of you who know George Johnson, you know that being without words is not a natural state for him. But even for those of us who see our campuses ever day, it is hard to not be taken aback at the dramatic changes.

In just the past few months we have opened a new parking deck with over 2,600 parking spaces; enjoyed a “topping off” ceremony at the Mason Inn & Conference Center, which will open next year; opened the doors to the new Recreation Athletic Complex, engineering building and arts building; expanded our student housing capabilities; and begun moving in new faculty and staff members into Masonvale.

These impressive facilities will be followed in the next eighteen months by additions to Student Union building one and the performing arts building; the new performing arts center at the Prince William campus; a biological research lab also at the Prince William campus; Founders Hall at the Arlington campus; and additional student housing.

Much is happening here and much will continue to happen here because that is the way it is at Mason. I predict that no matter our institutional age, there will always be part of us that remains “up and coming;” always that university on the rise, the one to keep an eye on. It is the source of our Patriot Pride. Other institutions hold fast. We move forward. We continue to reshape and mold our strengths to face the challenges before us as well as ones facing our world. We are here to serve, but not in a way that reacts or

simply responds to the whims or directives of others. We serve proactively, which means we lead. Each of you helps fuel that leadership.

I will pause now because part of what I want to do today is hear from you. If any of you have questions or wish to make comments, then please step forward. Also, let me remind you that immediately afterward, there is a reception in the lobby of Dewberry Hall.