

Address to the Northwest Coalition of Professional Staff
President Chuck Staben, University of Idaho
Thursday, July 19, 2018

Welcome to Moscow. It is a pleasure to join you this morning. Summer is a special time here on the Palouse. For those of you who have come from far away, we are glad you get to experience this season here where the rolling hills meet the mountains.

I appreciate the introduction from Summer Howard, our university's Staff Council Chair. Summer is a leader in our Parking and Transportation Services, and I'm very grateful we have her enthusiasm and diligence on our Staff Council.

I want to thank Summer and the rest of the conference organizers: David Pittsley, Nichole Vietz and Sue Branting, and several others who helped along the way. David and Nicole actually work in my office, so I enjoy a firsthand look at their skills, organization and dedication. You're in good hands today.

I know we've had a lot of other help from members of your organization. No conference of this size and scale can come together without a lot of time, planning, and passion.

Thank you for your efforts – I know they will go a long way toward the conference goals of enhancing your skills and perspectives as professionals.

We're all working to continuously improve because *we believe in the mission of higher education*. The role of professional staff in our higher education system is too often misunderstood or overlooked. In my own journey as an academic and an administrator, I've seen the differences in the roles of faculty and staff and their contributions to the system. I went from a tenured faculty member with a teaching and research portfolio into administration.

I won't claim to be in the trenches, anymore, but I do have some perspective on the different notions that inform faculty and staff work and relationships. It's one of the most important relationships at any university, because it informs how we carry out our mission to serve students, to embark on scholarship, and to engage with our communities.

Now, many of you work here at the University of Idaho, but I understand that many of you are visiting from institutions in the region. Thank you for coming out to our little corner of the Inland Northwest. I hope you've had a chance to explore the U of I campus.

If you haven't, I hope you'll indulge me as I give you a little tour, in the service of unpacking an idea about the role of staff and the faculty-staff relationship in higher education.

We have a beautiful and historic campus here at the University of Idaho in Moscow. It is distinguished by its greenery, its historical architecture, and by its classically planned campus.

The Admin Lawn is one of the distinguishing features of our Moscow campus at what is the state of Idaho's leading residential university. The Admin Lawn was actually planned by the Olmsted Brothers, the firm started by Frederick Olmsted, the landscape architect behind iconic green spaces such as Central Park in New York.

If you're coming up to the Lawn from downtown Moscow, you pass our Pitman Center, where we are today, and some of our Greek houses, before you ascend a series of steps now more than 100 years old, putting you on a shaded path west to the "new" Administration Building – or just the "Admin" building, as we call it.

Under the shade of an array of maples and oaks and pines, you pass by the statue honoring the U of I's Spanish-American War dead, young men named Ole Hagberg and Paul Draper.

You're on Hello Walk, named in 1920, and, as the name suggests, there are some expectations. We are a friendly campus – "big enough to matter, and small enough to care." Like presidents before me, I get a kick out of saying hello to the students and faculty, some I know and some perfect strangers, on their way to class or activities. Friendliness is a notable tradition, but it does seem, unfortunately, in short supply in many settings these days.

In the Admin Lawn, you'll find our "Presidential Grove." The University of Idaho has welcomed a number of U.S. presidents to its campus. On April 9, 1911, Theodore Roosevelt became the first U.S. president to visit the university. He stood on a platform built of sacks of Palouse wheat while delivering a vision to preserve our nation's natural resources. Then he began the honored tradition of planting a tree in the Presidential Grove.

The Grove contains trees planted by President William Taft, Vice President Thomas Marshall, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and more. The tree-planting tradition still is honored today. One of the most recent plantings, in a new area called the Peace Grove, was by the former president of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk in 2008. The shovel used by President Roosevelt to plant a tree on the Idaho campus in 1911 remains an integral part of the ceremonial tree plantings. (My wife notes that Eleanor's tree is doing better than Teddy's.)

As we continue this tour, here's what you've seen and what you've not seen. You've seen students excited about their day, apprehensive about their assignments, eager to explore all that's ahead of them. Some of them are huddled in close conversation, others are immersed in their earbuds or their smartphones – even so, many do still say "hello" if you press the issue. You've seen faculty members walking focused on their teaching, on their research, talking with some animation with a colleague or maybe trudging on in quiet contemplation.

Amid those classic evocations of college life, of course, you have a host of other people – the staff – who keep the university running. They schedule classes, they deliver products, they keep paychecks on time. The groundskeepers make sure the grass is cut, the leaves are raked, the walkways are cleaned. You may see advising teams walking together, discussing the ups and downs of the semester. The executive assistants are taking calls from their deans. You'll see the counselors on their way to meet with a student in need. The facilities managers are in their offices, updating the campus master plan, evaluating the health and longevity of those shady maple trees.

That work tends to go unheralded, but it is what keeps this university – any university – from a slow death as a vision without execution, but renewed every day as a vibrant, powerful force for learning, for innovation and discovery, and for culturally rich and connected communities.

Hello Walk leads, appropriately, to the Administration Building. At 109 years young, it is still our "new" Administration Building. In March of 1906, the Administration Building, the university's

landmark and major structure, was destroyed by fire. The university's 202 students were left adrift, though they did manage to save the university's records and "Silver and Gold" book, along with a stuffed mountain goat, but I digress. Catch me later for that story.

University President James McLean seize opportunity out of the ashes and embarked on an ambitious remaking of campus. He contacted the Olmsted brothers to remake the sparse grounds. He chose John E. Tourtellotte, architect of Idaho's Capitol building, to design a new Administration Building.

The "New" Administration Building was completed in 1909. It is today the administrative center of our U of I campus. Built in four sections, the Admin is in the style of College Gothic, with red pressed brick and buff-colored Boise sandstone trimmings. Stained glass windows flank the sides of the north wing's Auditorium. Ivy grows along the building's sides. It was claimed to be the first fireproof building in the Northwest.

As we end our tour at the entryway, I want to point out an inscription on the entryway. This is, essentially, what I've taken you to see. Most mornings I start my day by walking past it, just as our administrators, staff members and faculty members do. On the north wall in the great arched entryway, among that red-pressed brick and Boise sandstone, is a small historical marker. The inscription reads: *"Erected by the Commonwealth of Idaho for the training of her future citizens to their highest usefulness in private life and public service."*

Those words represent our university's promise to students. Each of us, whether administration, staff, or faculty, apply our idea of excellence to that sacred mission. We each have a role to play in the striving for a sort of collective excellence – different roles, each important.

As I said, I've seen multiple sides of that pursuit of excellence. Here's what I know. Most faculty members are highly focused on teaching and scholarship. Faculty members are independent operators, and that autonomy and agency are prized. As a teacher, it's "my classroom," or "my syllabus." As a researcher, it's "my lab," "my data," etc.

In my years as a scientist, I've seen the advantages of this approach: the permission to pursue an idea or a teaching subject with single-minded determination, to respect the demands of your specialty with a hyper-focused determination, to accept few impositions on what you need to excel. Great work does come out of that.

Using the Administration Building as an analogy, you might think of a faculty member as someone whose labor and love are to produce one of those single, perfect, red-pressed bricks. The faculty members around them are also producing bricks – maybe not the same bricks, but bricks. And over the years they independently produce and add a great many bricks.

Brick by brick, you're building *something* ... but to be honest, it's not always a building. Sometimes, it's just a lot of bricks.

Enter the staff member: the lab technician. The advisor. The counselor. The tutor. The recruiter getting students onto campus in the first place. These are all the people you see and don't see –

they are the bricklayers, the planners, the ones who hold the blueprints. *They figure out how the bricks add up to a building.*

That's a difficult job, I know. The work is often unglamorous. But without it, we have no building, no locus, no high-minded inscription to bind our efforts together in common purpose.

As I can attest, being blessed in my office every day, talented and committed staff are the key to getting a building where before there were only bricks. I want to commend you for taking the initiative to be here today, to learn and grow as a community of dedicated professionals.

Please accept my very best wishes for an edifying conference, and for your *continued success in getting all the right bricks in all the right places at your university.*