

2018 Convocation Address

Normal School: Our Early Beginnings Dr. Richard Davenport, President

**August 20, 2018 – 9:00 am
Centennial Student Union Ballroom
Minnesota State University, Mankato**

Good morning and welcome to our special fall Sesquicentennial opening address.

Thank you, Provost Wells, for the very nice introduction and for introducing all of our campus leaders. What a tremendous team! In addition, there are so many others, as you very well know, who often go unrecognized. These are the staff that keep this university running, that make certain our campus remains beautiful year-round, who serve the students and others every day ranging from financial aid, housing, events planning, career services, advising, food services, public relation, and hundreds of other ways that we sometimes take for granted.

Typically, at this point in my remarks I like to recognize our good friend and longtime colleague Dr. Jane Earley. Dr. Earley regularly attends our annual convocation ceremonies; however, she was not able to be here this morning. However, I have learned that Dr. Earley as well as both past presidents, Richard Rush and Margaret Preska will be joining us for our fall Sesquicentennial celebrations. We will let everyone know when they will be on campus in case you want to greet them.

Before I jump into my prepared message this morning, I want to mention our very, very beautiful campus at this time of year. We clearly have grounds and facility staff who take great pride in caring for our campus both outdoors and indoors; and it shows! In a recent walk through campus, one employee shared with me, “our goal is to always have the most attractive and beautiful campus in Minnesota!” I think they have succeeded...don’t you?

Today is one of those special occasions when I think it is important to look back in time. This is my goal for our time together this morning. Later, you will also have the privilege of hearing Provost Wells’ additional thoughts about our immediate academic future. She will be sharing many of the exciting ideas stemming from our recent University Retreat last week, which was attended by more than 115 campus leaders.

In recognition of our Sesquicentennial, and at the start of our academic year, we always look forward to recognizing our faculty and staff accomplishments. On your chair, thanks to our public relations and marketing department, you will find a new publication, “2018 Points of Pride” that elaborates on the many, many achievements of our faculty and staff. In addition, we

have a full-page newspaper advertisement listing your accomplishments in the Mankato Free Press that heralds the University.

As we move into the final weeks of our Sesquicentennial celebrations this fall, it is fitting that we step back in time and reflect on our past to acknowledge one of the most interesting and fascinating periods in Minnesota and higher education history: the Normal School era. It defines our university's very beginnings.

Please allow me to take a few minutes this morning to share some of the early history leading up to being named the second Normal School in Minnesota. Unfortunately, there is not enough time for me to elaborate on each of the important decades, the dramatic changes that occurred in Minnesota, the nation and the world, as well as the many presidents that led our institution beyond the landmark date in 1868 when we were approved to become a Normal School.

If you want to know more, I refer you to a new book, authored by Emeritus Professor Dr. Bill Lass entitled, *Minnesota State University, Mankato 1868-2018: A Sesquicentennial History*. Dr. Bill Lass retired in 2002, the year I arrived at MSU. As many of you know, Bill has authored several other history publications regarding the state of Minnesota and our university. I have taken the liberty in my remarks of citing a few stories, facts and figures from Bill's book. I apologize in advance Bill if I misquote you or include a fact out of context.

He has done a remarkable job assembling the story of our University through pain-staking fact-finding research. Bill, if you are in the audience, or at home, please know we all love the finished product resulting from your diligent research. Let us give author Professor Lass a round of applause!

One of the reasons his book is so fascinating and relevant to our Sesquicentennial is because of the interesting human stories that follow a natural progression of our Minnesota history. You learn so much about the University, community and State of Minnesota through the stories about people from that era.

Looking at this early period from today's perspective, it is interesting to understand what was taking place at the time in the State of Minnesota and how Mankato came to be. The treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851 allowed for the opening of the western land. Minnesota's population boomed from 40,000 in 1855 to 150,000 in 1857. The Native American lands in the Minnesota Valley were rich in game and supported native tribes for centuries. The land was fertile and appealing to the Native Americans, but also appealing to the White settlers.

Blue Earth County, of which Mankato is the county seat, is located on the Western edge of an area once known as the Big Woods where many rivers, streams and lakes existed providing the natural highways heavily traveled by the Native Americans who lived in the region for hundreds of years and who left their cultural imprint.

“Even earlier than this, a French explorer, Pierre Le Sueur, is recorded as the earliest White man to have come to this part of Minnesota in 1683; almost 200 years before the settlers arrived. The Native Americans were, of course, here thousands of years before Le Sueur. The first steamboat trip from St. Paul was in 1850 on the Minnesota River and took several days, often longer, to reach Mankato. The geography was well known, where the bend in the river and confluence of the Blue Earth River met. The first white settlers were P.K. Johnson and Henry Jackson, who established themselves at the site of present-day Mankato in 1852.”

Research from the Blue Earth County website also notes that, “The name *Blue Earth* is a translation of the Dakota word, *Mahkato*, meaning *Greenish blue earth*. The name of the City of Mankato would be *Mahkato* if it wasn’t for a spelling error.” Moreover, our university would be known as Minnesota State University, Mahkato!

The Dakota tribe lived west of Blue Earth County and the Winnebago tribe lived in eastern Blue Earth County. The tensions between the Native Americans and settlers, limited supplies allocated by Native American agents and other serious problems led to the Dakota War of 1862. That was a painful time in our history and one that is too complicated to do justice in this speech.

Nevertheless, it led to the opening of new land for settlements, which led to a dramatic increase of settlers in the region. In turn, this increase in population resulted in the need for the Normal Schools to train teachers that would educate new settlers. The Normal School Act passed in the year 1858. Minnesota later acted on the Act and announced that three Minnesota normal schools would be created in the next 5 years.

Being selected as a Normal School was competitive and if you were chosen as a site the City was required to raise \$5,000 to be matched by the State. The City of Winona apparently raised their \$5,000 in a matter of hours.

“Following Winona’s application, the City of Mankato filed next thanks to the efforts of Daniel Buck. Buck realized hosting a Normal School would address:

- the severe teacher shortages,
- encourage talent, wealth and business
- and, help create a more elevated and refined society in Mankato.”

Today, Daniel Buck is considered the Father of the Mankato Normal School. He was a lawyer when he moved to Mankato in 1865 and was elected to the House of Representatives the same year. Clearly, he carried considerable influence in the region and state.

When Winona received approval, it became the fourteenth Normal School in the country, the first School west of the Mississippi and the first Normal School in Minnesota. The other Normal schools were scattered across 10 states. Mankato and St. Cloud hold the distinction of being the second and third Normal Schools in Minnesota respectively. Several other Minnesota cities filed for a Normal School afterwards.

Once the Mankato Normal School designation was granted, George Gage, who was 34 years old at the time, was appointed as the first principal of the Mankato School in 1868. Allow me to share some interesting facts:

- On October 7, 1868, the first classes were held in the basement of the Methodist Episcopal Church.
- In November, the school moved to the Shaubut building with 82 students enrolled.
- Students understood that it took 2 years to earn a diploma.
- Two years later, funding for a new Normal School Building was provided by the Legislature.

Julia Sears was appointed as Principal in 1872 to succeed Gage and has been cited as the first female principal of a Normal School. She was initially hired as a teacher at the age of 32; however, it was unusual to have a female serve in the role of principal at that time. Anyway, there is a fascinating account of her service and the Sears Rebellion involving a student protest that took place following her term. Sears went on to enjoy a distinguished career at Peabody College, now part of Vanderbilt University.

Much was happening at this time. The Minnesota River had become an important steamboat route with Mankato as the destination in 1850. The bend in the river and the confluence of the Blue Earth River resulted in Mankato becoming a destination village for the steamboats and was a major reason why it became the largest community in the region. The rich farmland, of course, was very attractive to settlers.

To place this all-in perspective, consider these amazing historical facts:

- The first steamboat arrived in 1850
- Mankato became a Village in 1852
- The Mankato Village was chartered as a City in 1868.
- Mankatoans were also looking forward to the arrival of the first railroad, which reached the City on October 3, 1868
- The Normal School opened four days prior to the railroad arrival
- Therefore, the City of Mankato, the new railroad line to Mankato and the Mankato Normal School were all approved the same year!

Just imagine yourself living in this era and observing the changes from becoming a village in 1852, growing a large population, becoming a City, getting a railroad and Normal School all by 1868; only a 16-year span of time from 1852. While there is clearly so much more to the history of our region, these few historical tidbits and interesting developments leave us in awe regarding how much Minnesota was changing around the time our School was approved.

In summary, the Normal Schools in Minnesota played a very important role in the growth and development of the State. The Normal School was not really recognized as a college at this time. In the State of Minnesota, there was only one recognized public college; that was the University of Minnesota. Eventually, of course, our institution became a college and then a university. In fact, there have been a number of name changes over the past 150 years:

- Mankato Normal School,
- Mankato State Teachers College,
- Mankato State College,
- Mankato State University and
- Minnesota State University, Mankato.

These name changes reflected the evolution and expansion of higher education nationwide.

There was even a strong movement in 1960 to change our name to the University of Southern Minnesota following the pattern of Duluth, which wanted its own regional university in the Northern part of the state. However, the University of Minnesota and powerful legislators blocked our efforts. One has to wonder, looking back in time, if we had been singled out for University distinction back in 1960, what our institution would be like today. An interesting side note is that today we are offering numerous programs consistent with the typical Land Grant and Research University. We are proud of our accomplishments and continue to grow in maturity.

Over the past 150 years, our institution has experienced successful presidential leadership consistent with the needs of the time. There have been 12 regular presidents and a handful of interim presidents. They have all had their individual challenges along with the faculty, staff and administration respectively. A few presidents continued in the role for a very long time. My personal observation is that the institution advanced on a steady path largely because of the longevity of many of these presidents and the commitment of faculty, staff and the greater community and region.

As you can imagine, I could continue talking for hours this morning about our evolution as a university. However, believe me it was difficult to limit my address to this short span of time in our university's history. We know that the decades that followed the Normal School brought dramatic change and growth in higher education and in our nation. The 150-year period that followed our early beginnings has weathered some of the most trying times in our nation's history. Yet our colleges and universities continues to play a key role in our evolution and success as a country.

Historians often remind us that we can learn from the past! How often do we seriously follow that advice? In higher education, we know that we must change to meet the needs of society today and into the future.

My brief comments this morning of the early years during our Normal School period seem fitting as we look back to our beginnings. However, I know you understand that this is only the first chapter in our story. In summary, I ask you to step back in time periodically and remember the lessons learned from our past.

Everything is changing! Our constituent needs are changing, our environment is changing, and the advanced technological era promises to push us forward even faster than previous generations. We must see our future through the lens of the world always going forward with an ultimate goal to do our part in educating all people on our planet for the well-being of all!

I am confident that everyone here at the University understands that Real-World Thinking leads to discovery and these discoveries lead to solutions to global problems. Higher education has a momentous role to play in our future.

You will hear from Provost Wells shortly. She has much to share regarding the many wonderful suggestions, ideas and challenges about how together we can enhance student success and prepare for an era of disruption.

At the same time, I promise, along with other campus leaders, that we will stay on track with our strategic plan and the numerous initiatives that we have discussed over the last several years. We must be attuned to learning from history and anticipating the challenges ahead.

We must be nimble and willing to change in light of the global factors influencing our environment, market place and world politics. We are living in a disruptive time that threatens our existence and we need to be prepared to adopt change at a rate that we have possibly never experienced as a nation and world.

In closing, 150 years is a major milestone and I am so pleased that our campus has embraced this landmark with more than 150 different celebration events already this past year. We will experience a few more celebrations by the time we reach that special October 7 birthday in a few weeks. I hope that everyone participates in the Homecoming events, the big parade and the Birthday Bash on October 6 this fall. Please join me in all our special festivities.

Once again, thank you everyone for your important contributions to this great university!

Now is a time for celebration!

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