



# THE INAUGURATION OF *Heidi Macpherson, PhD*

The Seventh President of the State University of New York College at Brockport  
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## Community and Leadership Lessons

With both community and gratitude as the touchstones of this speech, it is only right and fair that I begin today with thanks. Thank you so much for being here to help celebrate The College at Brockport and our academic community. I particularly want to thank SUNY chancellor, Nancy Zimpher, the SUNY Board of Trustees, the College Council and the search committee members for the faith they have placed in me. It is truly a privilege to work in higher education.

I also want to thank the distinguished members of the platform party, the delegates representing our sister schools, our faculty, staff and students, our emeriti, our distinguished professors and alumni, my academic and professional colleagues from around the country, my family and friends, who have come out in force and in strength to be here — thank you! — along with our community members, our legislators, and all the other friends of Brockport who have gathered here today. Thank you. To my wonderful and very favorite professor, Dr. Klepetar, from whom you heard earlier: thank you for teaching me to write and for believing in my ability to do so, and for being here to share in this moment with me.

In honoring our past and planning for our future, I also want to recognize our former presidents in attendance today, John Van de Wetering and John Halstead, for the service they offered to our great institution. Thank you.

Today I want to highlight Brockport's commitment to community and thank the inauguration committee who worked so hard to ensure that this week of activities was a fitting tribute to the history of our College and what we hold dear. President Tower, in his installation speech, outlined the need to move from "self-sufficiency and isolation to an understanding of global inter-dependency," a sentiment that holds as true today as it did in 1944.

Our Brockport community is vast and varied, from former principals and presidents, to significant women of Brockport honored and highlighted, from Fannie Barrier Williams, the first African American graduate of Brockport back in 1870, through to our own Margay Blackman, Brockport's mayor, who serves our community so well. I am proud to be the first woman president of the College,

but many women have paved the way before me and we owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude. Indeed, we have a series of paving stones—as well as buildings—named after the women of Brockport, and it was my honor to learn more about them from our archivist, Charlie Cowling. Charlie wrote to me that "a school like ours has a quite admirable history of opportunity for women, as students, [and] professors. Long before women could attend or teach at many private Ivy League schools they were studying and teaching at academies and Normal schools like we once were." I learned that Edwards Hall was named in part for Aletta Edwards, chair of the English department from 1908 to 1934. She was a Brockport alum who undertook advanced work towards her doctorate at the University of Wisconsin as well as Cambridge University, England. Her transatlantic connections, her Midwestern education and her subject, English, make me believe we might have had some things in common.

Ronald Heifetz, Founding Director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard claimed in a recent speech to college presidents, "To make a good diagnosis, you must first take a history."<sup>1</sup> It certainly is true that to understand our wonderful College, we must pay tribute to those who have gone before, and who have done the hard work of diversifying our community,

whether they were aware that they were groundbreaking individuals or not. Five women have paving stones named after them, including Fannie Barrier Williams, honored earlier this week with a plaque unveiled at Hartwell Hall. She was a nationally known public speaker, writer and activist for civil and gender rights. Mary Jane Holmes was a successful novelist and a keen supporter of the College, and Holmes Hall is in part named after her. Pauline Haynes was a music instructor and the first chair of the music department, who lends her name to a room in the Alumni House. Ruth Drake was a kindergarten instructor and campus school librarian for over 30 years, and our current library is, in part, named after her. Alice Yale was an art teacher here at Brockport, who was a "respected, loved and colorful personality" and that description alone makes me wish I had known her. Briggs, Mortimer, Neff (now part of Lathrop Hall) and Vanderhoof (which is now part of Morgan Hall) were all named after women who were important both to the College and to the wider Brockport



community. I honor these women leaders, because they had many more barriers to overcome to success than most women leaders these days.

I myself have been blessed with mentors who have seen in me more than I saw in myself, and who have urged me and indeed pushed me to find that person. They have taught me by example to reach out to others and to look for talent to nurture—because surely that is our highest calling and the best way we have to give back to our community.

I was fortunate, while in the UK, to be selected for a year-long program of learning with top civil servants, managers in the National Health Service, the fire service, the police service and a few educationalists like me. Together we learned a lot about different kinds of leadership, and I am proud to see where my community colleagues have ended up, leading major organizations such as the UK Passport office and other areas. As part of that program, we had a week in South Africa, learning about leadership there. We visited entrepreneurs, and local officials; some of us visited an HIV/AIDS clinic, and most of us visited schools. I learned a significant lesson in leadership when I went to a school in the township of Soweto.

The school was behind a barbed wire fence. Our young hosts served us Coke and chips, and asked us if we had these items where we came from, too. Their sense of place was different from ours. We asked them about the barbed wire fence and I learned a lot about leadership in their answer. “We did that,” they said, with shining eyes and wide smiles. “We wanted the fence and we got it. We wanted to be safe at school and now we are. Now we can learn.” They raised money for a fence so that they could be free of fear, of drug dealing and of crime. They were proud of their fence, because it was a visible reminder of their promise and their success to come. They reminded me that leadership comes at all levels, from all those who are prepared to make a difference and take responsibility for making change happen. They certainly taught me to review with a different lens something that my cultural frame was framing wrongly. As Stephanie Bower recently wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “One of the most valuable components of a liberal-arts education is the ability to encounter experiences beyond our own that simultaneously shrink and expand our sense of the world.”<sup>ii</sup>

We also visited a maximum security prison. We met 25 men, who sat with us and told us their stories. Most of the stories were of how they had ended up in prison, and none of the stories were nice, and all of them, I’m sure, were partial. One man admitted that his sentence was 300 years. 300 years. Later that day we would leave the prison,

but he never would. And yet that man talked about his gratitude. Those 25 men had a leader who recognized something in each of them to nurture and who led them to a place where gratitude was at the center of their day. Each had a gratitude stone. At the end of the night, they held the stone and recounted all the things for which they were grateful. The men in the room did not alter their sentences by becoming part of the group that practiced gratitude, so there was no exterior motivation for doing so. But even in the most difficult circumstances, they chose to be part of a community that decided to take charge of how they responded to those circumstances. An egalitarian leadership was practiced, as each man received time to

speaking and to connect and as each one then passed a talking stick to someone else to share. At the end of our time with them, they passed out gratitude stones to us, and I knew that who I was as a leader could be transformed through gratitude, too. I still have that stone. I have more than one.

Today I am grateful to Mark Noll and his students, who went to a quarry near the southern shoreline of Lake Ontario and, with permission, gathered over 700 stones and brought them back to campus. They polished them, and put them into bags. They are the College’s parting gift to you: an individual gratitude stone, to help sustain our community and strengthen it. The stones represent so much more to me than just gratitude, though I hope gratitude will remain at the

heart of what we achieve. The stones originated in Canada, and so symbolize our international connections, which are of particular interest to me given my lifelong commitment to international education. I have benefited from it tremendously—indeed my life was utterly transformed by my international experiences—and we have, as a College, just signed up to the Institute of International Education’s “Generation Study Abroad” program designed to double the number of US students who study abroad. The stones were gathered through a service learning and undergraduate research opportunity, which shows our commitment to our community of students, who learn best when we actively participate in their lives and education. Experiential learning has been part of Brockport since it began as a teacher training college. Moreover, it is a pillar of the new strategic plan that we are undertaking this year. And these rocks are a way of connecting our community to you.

Heifetz argues that we must “learn from and encourage the leadership that is being practiced every day by people without authority.”<sup>iii</sup> I believe my position as president should be one of service, but I also know that I have a position of great authority. I recognize, though, that leadership doesn’t reside in the 7th floor of Allen Administration Building: it is practiced every day by the



person who sees a visitor on campus looking at the campus map and asks if they can help guide them to where they want to go; it resides in the careers counselors who help the students work through their strengths and areas of interest; it is in the coaches who make sure our students are not just All American, but Academic All Americans, with strong GPAs as well as athletic prowess. It is in the professors who transform the lives of the students they teach, by pushing them to go beyond easy answers and comfortable positions to positions of discomfort and intellectual growth. I am grateful to everyone who willingly becomes part of this wider community and who works to ensure the success of our students.

I have spent the last nine months listening as people have talked to me about the things we should focus on, as an institution, to ensure that we achieve our objectives. We have, I am pleased to say, completed the work on our “Fund the Future” project which engaged a large group of people in the task of rightsizing our budget. Budget management is never very exciting work, but it was truly necessary, and I am grateful to our colleagues for their diligent and sometimes provocative conversations on our priorities. This was a necessary first step in helping us launch our new strategic planning process. This work is ongoing, but again a committed group of individuals is helping to define who we are and who we want to be, and I can share with you that the things that have historically made us Brockport are still key to our future: our focus on student engagement, our commitment to the wider community, our desire to make our transformative research of benefit to the public. Education is a public good, and our community IS the world. I firmly believe in a greater Brockport for a greater Rochester, and a greater Brockport for a greater world. As a College, we are building our strategic plan around four pillars: community, engagement, excellence and transformation, and I can’t wait to see the results of our collective efforts.

The academic community is the strongest and most fragile of our communities: it expands beyond the borders of our campus master plan and even across oceans: my own academic community is international in scope, despite its contestable title: American Studies. In fact, American Studies is a community I did not know existed until I left the shores of the United States, and I am grateful to my American Studies colleagues for being part of my intellectual life.

Our community is strengthened by trust and academic freedom, and weakened by distrust and threats around funding. At its best, it is a community that offers nurture and respect, communication and care, and it is at its best when we care for it: when we actively choose to be

part of something larger than ourselves, when we offer our service and our collective energies to sustain it. This last year, we reissued our Better Community Statement, and we’re using it with incoming first year and transfer students, at department meetings, and elsewhere, and I would urge you to look it up if you are a visitor to campus. We promise many things in this statement, only a few of which I’ll mention here, but they are things that resonate with me in relation to our community focus. The statement begins, “As members of the State University of New York College at Brockport, we choose to be a part of an academic community that is dedicated to principles that foster integrity, civility and justice. As citizens of a broad and pluralist

society, we encourage those of all cultures, orientations and backgrounds to educate, understand and respect one another in a safe environment.” The statement notes that we “realize that our common interests exceed our individual differences” and that “we affirm that the well-being of our individual units, groups, organizations or disciplines cannot be separated from the overall College community.” Moreover, “As members of this College community, we strive for academic and personal excellence that will enable us to achieve lives of productive work, personal enrichment and useful citizenship in an increasingly interdependent world.”

Academic leadership requires a willing community and a shared goal, and I know that as we

continue to focus as a campus on our new plans, we will keep community at the center of what we do. Internally, we have created NEST, a New Employee Support Training opportunity as well as an internal promotion policy that helps our community strengthen itself. Externally, we continue to work in partnership with others. This year alone, the campus has launched a new Institute for Poverty Studies and Economic Development, and continued, through the REOC, to be a strong member of the Rochester Monroe County Anti-Poverty Task Force. We have strengthened our relationships with local and area schools, continuing to support, for example, the SummerLEAP program for students from School 17, to help reduce summer learning loss. We continue to partner with Camp Good Days and Special Times, and this year, we have also made a commitment to the Rochester Rotary’s Sunshine Camp. We have created a new partnership with Top Capital in relation to a Senior Living complex in Sweden that will offer our students opportunities for service learning and encourage our local seniors to make this college their own. We launched a new Flying Start, Flying Finish donor program to help students achieve success in their chosen paths, and to help them with financial support as they near the end of their work with us. We have supplemented the funds we





offer for undergraduate research opportunities and are now actively soliciting support for this important high impact practice. By 2022, we will have doubled the number of summer research awards we give out. This work helps our students remain part of our academic community, and eventually go on to help support others as they have been supported.

And on the theme of community, it is worth remembering that the College has had a long and important, even symbiotic, relationship with the Village of Brockport community. Over the years, and on several separate occasions, the village community and prominent citizens have been staunch advocates for the College, and provided significant support to ensure that it survived through both political and financial threats to its future. It's fair to say the college would not be here, had that support not been forthcoming. Today, the College has a very large footprint in the community, and it is through working together that we can ensure that this relationship remains a positive one. I would like to strengthen our links through town and gown initiatives, and I believe we can continue to be a positive influence through the work of our students, faculty and staff, in outreach, research, recreation and education. We have a significant role to play in supporting the regeneration of Brockport and the wider Rochester area. It is through initiatives in partnership that this can be achieved.

Given this emphasis on partnership, I want to share one last story of my leadership journey. I was privileged to attend SUNYCON 2015, and to be part of a small group of individuals who were given a master class in improvisation by the actor and now SUNY professor Alan Alda. Alda stressed to us that you cannot have innovation without communication. At one point, he put us into random pairs, and asked us to do a mirroring exercise. The brief was clear: in pairs, make your partnership so close that the audience cannot tell who's leading, and who's following. At the end of our first practice session, my partner and I were called to demonstrate, and told to "switch" roles: my partner would now be the follower, and I would be the leader, despite having practiced the other way around.

It turns out, my follower wasn't a very good follower. He was always at least half a beat behind. There was, I admit, a certain frustration on my part. At the end of the exercise, the whole group knew I was the leader. His lack of attention made that obvious. Except that it didn't. What made it obvious to everyone was that I was not attentive enough to my partner. I moved too quickly. I expected him to read my mind. It was my communication style that was at fault. What a hard—and crucial—lesson to learn. It is easy to be seduced into thinking you are right, and difficult, but vital, to look for other perspectives.

I tell you that story because it was hard feedback to

get. After all, one of my heroes, Alan Alda, pointed out my mistakes — to everyone in the room! And now I point them out to you — because I want to be open to feedback. I want us all to strive to communicate better, to work in partnership, and to receive feedback not with humiliation, but with humility. Our academic community is stronger if we do those things together, and I will commit to continue to try to invite and to receive with wisdom the feedback that you offer me.

I can report that there was a happy ending. My partner and I got better at the exercise. By the end, we were pretty good at it. And Alan Alda posed for a photograph with me, which I Tweeted, so it all turned out all right.

I want to close on some words by a Brockport community member, a woman who passed away at the end of 2015: Frances Moroney Whited. Fran was an emerita professor and one of our College's greatest supporters, and she was never happier than when introducing us to one of her mentees, or her scholarship winners. Although I only met her a few times, I was struck by her energy and community spirit. Fran is reported to have used this phrase as her guiding principle: "You can influence many lives. Do your best!" To Fran, and to all my colleagues, I want to thank you for the life and leadership lessons you have offered, but perhaps I like Fran's the most: "You can influence many lives. Do your best!"

Thank you.



The College at  
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<sup>i</sup> Ronald Heifetz, "The Alchemy of College Leadership," Address at the ACE Annual Conference, March 13, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Bower, Stephanie. "When Ex-Prisoners Share Their Stories With Students." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 22 January 2016, p. A56.

<sup>iii</sup> "The Alchemy of College Leadership."