

## Welcome Back Address, Fall 2008

Bill Destler

I will not sign this speech, because if I did, we would be here all day, but I remain committed to learning to sign, and once again I will sign my commencement speech next Spring.

First of all, welcome back! It seems hard to believe it has been more than a year since Rebecca and I came to Rochester to join the RIT family. And what a year it has been! I cannot express strongly enough my gratitude for the support that all of you - faculty, staff, students, alumni, Trustees, and the entire Rochester community have provided to me during my first year as RIT's President. Let's look back at what all of you (not me, you!) have collectively accomplished over the last year:

- RIT grew in enrollment to become one of the nation's 15 largest private universities and is now the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest producer of undergraduate degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (the critical STEM areas) among all private universities. In fact, we are now the number one producer of undergraduate computing degrees among all institutions nationally, public or private.
- Applications for Fall admission to our undergraduate programs grew by 15% last year to over 15,000, making RIT one of the nation's most selective institutions of higher education. Even more importantly, virtually all of this increase in applications came as a result of increased interest in our programs from women, minorities, and applicants from outside of the New York State region. Applications to our graduate programs grew by 9%.
- As a result, this year's Freshman class will be both more talented and more diverse than last year's. In fact, the percentage of women and minorities in the Freshman class will each increase by more than 2% of the total, the first such increases in several years.
- The percentage of Freshmen that returned to RIT for their second year increased by 2% from 87% to 89% this past Fall, and those improved numbers should result in a marked improvement in undergraduate graduation rates over the next few years. Nevertheless, enhanced student retention and graduation rates must remain a primary focus for RIT if we are to join the ranks of the nation's finest private universities.

- We have added a distinguished and diverse group of new faculty to our already distinguished instructional and research staff. Four-time Pulitzer Prize winning photographer (and RIT Alum!) William Snyder will join our faculty in the Fall, and as a result of the tireless efforts of our deans and department chairs and their associated faculty and staff members, the percentage of our faculty who are women and minorities will also increase, continuing the strong progress in this area initiated during President Simone's tenure.
- A number of our faculty have received national and international awards during the past year, too many to single out individually, but I will mention that Prof. David Long won an Academy Award last year, and few universities can claim that kind of recognition.
- This past year we initiated a number of new academic programs in areas as diverse as sustainable engineering, philosophy, and human-computer interaction, and we launched a new Ph.D. program in astrophysical science and technology. In addition, we have a number of new programs pending approval from New York State, including undergraduate programs in journalism, chemical engineering, 3D digital graphics, philosophy and a new Ph.D. program in Sustainability. That new Ph.D. program will bring to 6 the number of unique cross-disciplinary Ph.D. programs offered at RIT.
- Speaking of Sustainability, we launched the Golisano Institute for Sustainability with the announcement of a \$10M gift from Trustee Tom Golisano, and we followed that up with an additional \$18M in pledged funding from State and Federal sources, \$3M in additional State funds to establish the New York State Pollution Prevention Institute at RIT, a \$2M gift from Xerox, and additional contract and grant funding totaling more than \$10M over the past year. As a result, RIT's activities in the area of sustainable production and manufacturing, in pollution control and prevention, and in the area of renewable energy sources, are now arguably among the strongest such efforts in the world.
- But in addition to these activities undertaken under the umbrella of the Golisano Sustainability Institute, the campus can boast of many other faculty working in areas such as environmental science, sustainable engineering, green transportation, and environmental policy. Finally, our division of

Finance and Administration is working with the campus to make RIT itself a national model of sustainable business practices.

- Sponsored research activity grew by 20% last year to almost \$50M, not including the \$60M from the Federal Government we received in support of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. Since much of the increased funding in the area of sustainability will be received during the current academic year, the outlook for next year's sponsored research total appears bright, indeed.
- Also in the area of research, we initiated the new "Corporate R&D at RIT" program, and we have already signed up a number of major companies to the program. These companies include PAETEC, Harris, National Semiconductor, and Ortho-Clinical Diagnostics, among others.
- Private gifts to RIT last year doubled from the previous year to almost \$26M (the previous year was admittedly a low year in this category due to post-campaign donor fatigue), and the percentage of alumni who contribute to RIT increased from 8.4% to 9.6%, despite the fact that the total number of RIT alumni increased by about 3% just because of the large number of students we graduated last year. Speaking of our alumni, last year I visited 31 cities across the nation in an attempt to re-connect our alumni with their alma mater. What I found was an increasingly proud group of alumni who are eager to help build this wonderful institution. Over the next year I will continue these trips and work with our alumni to find new ways in which they can contribute.
- We held our first "Imagine – RIT, Creativity and Innovation Festival", with over 400 exhibits, demonstrations, and performances displaying the extraordinary range of creative and innovative work here on the RIT campus. Over 17,000 people attended, and we look forward to an even bigger festival next Spring as we move to identify RIT as an international center of innovation and creativity unlike any other.
- Speaking of innovation, last year a group of dedicated faculty, staff, and students, led by Kit Mayberry and Ann Coon, worked to explore ways in which our curriculum could be productively modified to support student innovation, creative work, and research. That report includes specific

recommendations, many of which can be implemented quickly at minimal cost, to support innovative and creative work by our students.

- We completed construction on our first certifiably green building, the new College of Applied Science and Technology Building, which recently received LEED Gold certification, and we have initiated construction on our new Administrative Services Building and Student Innovation Center. Later this year, we will initiate construction on a new facility for the School for American Crafts, on the Vignelli Design Center, and the Global Village housing complex, and we will begin planning a new facility for the Golisano Institute for Sustainability. In addition, we will renovate part of the Student Alumni Union to accommodate growing student demands for organizational and recreational space, and we will complete a major campus upgrade to our heating and air-conditioning systems that should result in a net fuel savings of around 50% when fully operational.
- We officially opened our new RIT campus in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, and we will offer our first classes at this new campus this Fall. This new campus will extend RIT's global reach and complement our existing campuses in Croatia and Kosovo.
- We also just celebrated the opening of Park Point, our new partnership development with the Wilmorite Corporation, which provides additional housing and a much-needed college town environment for our students adjacent to campus.
- We thanked Stan McKenzie for his extraordinary service as Provost and this Fall we welcome his successor, Dr. Jeremy Haefner, to RIT. This Fall we also welcome Dr. Robert Ulin as Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Dr. Fred Walker as Dean of the College of Applied Science and Technology. We are indebted to Profs. Glenn Kist and Carol Richardson for their dedicated service as Interim Deans of these colleges.
- And as I'm thanking people, I want to thank Vice President Watters and his hard-working team in finance and administration for their aggressive cost-cutting and productivity enhancing efforts. It is these efforts that have helped to fund new academic initiatives and helped us do a better job of controlling the overall-cost of attendance for our students over the past decade than have any other regional private universities.

- In July, we took a group of 60 RIT Trustees, Vice Presidents, Deans, and senior staff members to Northern California. In addition to holding our usual July Board of Trustees meeting, the group visited 22 companies and discussed innovation, corporate research and development, sustainability programs, and collaborative models. We also asked these corporate leaders what they would like to see in our future graduates, and our trustees, many of them Rochester business leaders, gained new ideas on how to spark innovation within their own companies.
- And most importantly, all of you continued to focus your activities on our most important constituents – our students. During the past year I have been deeply impressed by the commitment of our faculty and staff to our students in the quality of instruction we provide, in the provision of services of all kinds, and in working to provide our students with a college experience outside of the classroom that rivals that provided by the best institutions in the nation.
- Oh, and one more thing – I had to dye my hair orange and we beat both Cornell and Minnesota in Hockey. Go Tigers!

For all of this I can only say thanks. I know that this progress was achieved because RIT is more than just a job to all of you. You have put your collective hearts and souls into this place in a way that compensation alone cannot produce.

Where to next? Together, we have set forth on a course that will, if we have the courage to navigate it, move RIT into the ranks of the nation's finest private universities. Continuing to make progress toward our shared goals will require a number of specific steps during the coming year:

- We must redouble our efforts to retain and graduate students from our undergraduate programs. In addition, we must pay special attention to the retention and graduation of minority students.
- We must expand our geographic reach and continue to increase the number of students who apply to our programs. Greater numbers of applications can materially assist us in our efforts to increase overall student quality and diversity.

- We must work to establish a faculty teaching load policy that, if implemented over a period of several years, will allow sufficient time for faculty to engage in research, scholarship, and creative work.
- We must create a well-organized plan to ensure that our best faculty, staff, and students are nominated for the most significant national awards and fellowships.
- Recommendations from the report of the innovation and creativity working group need to be forwarded by the Provost to the Academic Senate this Fall for review and implementation as deemed appropriate by the faculty.
- We must begin a more organized effort to tell the world about what is happening at RIT. This year we will organize a working group to look at how we market the university and how we might be more effective in building our academic reputation.
- We must formulate plans to make the most effective use of the new Student Innovation Center, currently under construction, and design the new “entrepreneur’s house” that will be included in the Global Village housing complex.
- We must work hard to ensure that this year’s Imagine-RIT festival is even bigger and better than last year. This is a statement event for RIT, and an important internal bonding activity as well.
- We must continue to work to increase research activity, private fundraising, alumni engagement, and the diversity of our student, faculty, and staff populations.
- Speaking of diversity, our goal to increase the percentage of female students on the campus will require us to expand and adjust our academic program inventory to include programs, like biomedical engineering, that attract women in reasonable numbers.
- We must work to ensure that the campus as a whole optimally benefits from the presence of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. This extraordinary asset not only adds an element of diversity to our campus

unique to RIT, but it opens up a whole field of educational and intellectual activity that can, if we are smart enough to exploit it, be one of our key “unfair” advantages over the competition.

- We must study how we might make more effective use of the campus during the Summer quarter. An expanded Summer School and other Summer programs on campus will improve our overall operating efficiency and can be an important source of additional revenue for the university.
- Finally, this year we will try out an “open administration initiative” in which I and the Vice Presidents will give reports to the campus community on such issues as strategic directions, budgeting, new academic programs, student enrollment, fundraising, facility planning, research programs, diversity efforts, student affairs, and community and government relations. In this manner I hope to keep the RIT community informed of important new initiatives and obtain broader community input before significant decisions are made.

If we can continue to make this kind of progress during the years ahead, RIT will quickly take its place among the nation’s finest universities, public or private. And we will have accomplished that goal for the best of reasons – we will have worked for the benefit of our students, our community, our nation, and the world, and perhaps had some fun along the way. Here’s to another great year for RIT! Thanks again for your support.