

Remarks by President William A. Covino
University Convocation
Monday, September 23, 2013
Luckman Fine Arts Complex

Good morning. I feel privileged and honored to join you as the seventh President of California State University, Los Angeles, as we begin to build on the great foundation that you all have established under the leadership of President Rosser.

Today, we welcome a distinguished faculty dedicated to the success of our students; staff members who make Cal State L.A. a place where everyone is made to feel welcome and supported; and administrators whose leadership and advocacy contribute to our reputation as a distinguished and well-respected institution. Will all of our faculty members please stand and let us recognize you. Will all of our staff members please stand and let us recognize you as well.

I am pleased to welcome a number of special guests, in addition to Congresswoman Chu and Mayor Garcetti. Let me ask you to hold your applause until I've recognized everyone. I begin with a special welcome to Monica Garcia, Senior Legislative Deputy for Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina; Thelma Melendez, Director of Education and Workforce Development for Mayor Garcetti, and LA County Supervisor Mike Antonovich, a distinguished alum. Other distinguished alumni in attendance include Michael Cervantes, Rosie and David McNutt, former U.S. Treasurer Rosario Marin, Gary Matus, Charles and Dorothy Palmer, Pamela Angerer Payne, Jorge Ramirez, Frank Saito, David Sandoval, Linda Wah, Elizabeth Wheeler, and Willie Zuniga. In addition, we welcome generous friends and supporters who include Dr.

Joseph Bailey and Sharon Bingaman, Andy Bicos, Judy Burton, Patrick Harris, and “Nat Travis,” as well as George Simpson, Principal of the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts; and Kirsten Woo, Principal of the Alliance Marc and Eva Stern Math and Science School—both schools are located here on campus. And I want to make sure to thank the members of the Presidents Associates here today, for their strong, ongoing support. Please join me in welcoming all of these special guests.

I’m also very glad to have you meet members of my family: Danny Covino, who begins this quarter as a transfer student at Cal State L.A., and Debbie Covino, whose love and support and advice has won my heart over and over again.

As some of you know, I’m not a stranger to Los Angeles. I spent my teens and twenties leading a music-for-all-occasions band. We played at wedding receptions, bar mitzvahs, and the like, throughout the county and beyond--at locales that ranged from the Mint Canyon Moose Lodge in Saugus to Sportsman’s Lodge in Studio City, to Luminarias in Monterey Park, and Cantor’s Deli on Fairfax. At that same time, I was studying literature and rhetoric at UCLA and then at USC, on my way to becoming an English Professor. I began my academic career at San Diego State as an assistant professor, and after holding positions at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Florida Atlantic University, came back to the CSU, as Provost at Cal State Stanislaus and then at Fresno State.

I came back to the CSU because I realized that our mission, as the largest public university system in the country, providing well over 400,000 students the opportunity to learn and reap the rewards that only a university degree can bring, as the place where

teacher-scholars put students first, is the academic institution that most speaks to my own values and all that inspires me.

I see Cal State L.A., in particular, as a great university in a great city. I embrace the opportunity to work with all of you to make even better the university and the city whose students we serve. When we tie learning and scholarship to a sense of place, to grappling with a unique set of opportunities, challenges, and circumstances that define the quality of life, we become the engine of urban and regional transformation. With this aim in view, I ask your help with one important enterprise: telling our story. Let me briefly share a bit more of *my own* story. Like so many in Cal State L.A.'s community, I'm a first generation college student from a working class family, with parents who knew that education was the key to a better future for their children. On early winter mornings in Connecticut, where we lived until I was 12, I remember watching my father walk to his factory job through the gray chill air, with little more than a sandwich in a paper bag and a dollar in his pocket. His goal was to come home at night without having spent that dollar on himself. He saved those dollars to buy his kids a set of encyclopedias, and for me in particular, music lessons. He had never taken a college class, yet he often told me—in a tone of command I took very seriously—that I would one day be going to college, to seize the opportunity that he had missed, and to begin my adult life with more than a dollar in my pocket. We have, in the communities that surround us, thousands of hardworking parents who want success and happiness for their children, and they deserve our applause today as well. We have, at Cal State L.A., thousands of stories of determination, struggle, and achievement that weave the fabric of a collective narrative that holds the promise of the future.

Our story is the story of extraordinary alumni, like Leana Wen, currently Director of Patient-Centered Care Research at George Washington University. She began her studies at Cal State L.A. at the age of 13 as a student in the Early Entrance Program. Passionate about global issues, public health and local communities, Dr. Wen went on to become a Global Health Fellow at the World Health Organization, where she researched trade policies and access to medicines. She has studied conflict and HIV in Kigali, Rwanda. She has served as a faculty member at Harvard medical school as well as a consultant for national and international organizations. Inspired by her mother's struggles with cancer, she has become a strong advocate for patients and written a bestselling book, called *When Doctors Don't Listen*.

Our story is the story of Toni Gonzalez. Born in Las Vegas to hardworking Mexican-American immigrant parents, as a child Toni's lack of English skills made her feel secluded, and prevented her from fitting in at school. Her parents struggled financially while she was growing up, each working more than 40 hours a week, nearly seven days a week. As the only girl of three children, she retreated into herself and became "the quiet one." Fortunately, her isolation sparked in her a passion for literature, and for learning about the world, both above and below ground. Toni Gonzalez now channels that passion as an archeology graduate student at Cal State L.A. To help fund her studies, she has been honored with the **William Randolph Hearst/CSU Trustees' Award for Outstanding Achievement.**

Our story is the story of Betania Santos. Over the past few years, while at Cal State L.A., Betania Santos endured the painful loss of both her sister and her mother to cancer. Understanding that she had inherited a dangerously higher risk for breast cancer, Betania underwent a mastectomy and reconstructive surgery when she was just 20. Rather than feel sorry for herself, Betania resolved to perform well academically and to use her experience to benefit others. With determination and drive, she completed her bachelor's degree in sociology this past June and will continue on to a master's degree in sociology. Her ultimate goal is to earn a doctorate so that she can conduct research on the social aspects of cancer, treatment, and post-operative adjustment.

Our story is the story of Darnell Cates. If you know Darnell Cates, you know it's no surprise he's here at Cal State L.A. If you know his back-story, you also know that the odds were against him. By his adoptive mother's own admission, "He shouldn't be here. But God had another plan." In the coldest of terms, you might say Darnell is a child of "the system." He remembers the gang neighborhood of his childhood. At five years old, he found a gun under his brother's bed. He was taught to steal from the nearby liquor store and from neighbors. He missed school, a lot, and ended up in foster care, and was shuttled through 6 or 7 foster homes over two years alone. One year his Christmas gift was a nothing more than a box of Oreos. Eventually adopted by Mary and Arthur Cates, who have nurtured Darnell's great potential for success, Darnell is now a student at Cal State L.A. He is an aspiring film maker, who says that his childhood experience

helps shape the characters he portrays. Only a tiny percentage of kids from foster care go to college, so as Darnell steps back onto the campus, he's already beaten the odds.

Toni, Betania, and Darnell are here with us today. Please stand and let us thank you for your courage, perseverance, and achievements.

Our story is also the story of Luis Antezana, told here in his own words. Take a look:

[Play Video]

Just last week, we learned that Luis has received the California State University Trustees Award for Outstanding Achievement. Luis, please stand and let us congratulate you.

These are the stories, among so many others, that reflect both our history and our future. And of course, no one of these individuals made it alone. As we applaud them, we also applaud the teachers, family members, guides, and mentors who led them to personal and academic achievement. Everyone in this room is included, but especially the professors whose passion for creating and sharing new knowledge inspires us all, and the staff members who welcome and guide the Betanias and Tonis and Darnells and Luis's who make up the fabric of who we are.

Their stories remind us that we are, first and foremost, a university dedicated to the public good. I was thrilled to see us recognized nationally for this just a few weeks back. Cal State L.A. has been ranked #18 nationally in the Master's University category

by *Washington Monthly*, an increasingly influential magazine that measures the University's (quote) "contribution to the public good in three broad categories: Social Mobility (recruiting and graduating [students from lower-income households]), Research (producing cutting-edge scholarship and PhDs), and Service (encouraging students to give something back to their country)." I've seen no finer description of precisely what we achieve at Cal State L.A.

We are ranked #6 nationally in our category for "Social Mobility," because we are graduating a much higher proportion of students than many other institutions with similar demographics.

We're ranked among the top 10% for research funding; among the top 20% of institutions whose students go on for PhDs; and among the top 25% in our support for and participation in community service.

We are, in so many ways, a remarkable success. What, then, are some of the next steps we can take to continue to climb to even greater heights?

In my view, the key to our success and the success of every public university is, in a word, engagement. We have come a long way from the "ivory tower" detachment that characterized many American universities during the last century. The CSU has become an exemplary model of "working for California" through outreach and community engagement initiatives that have made our campuses a driving force for student success and economic development. Continuing distinction and achievement, for the CSU in general and for Cal State L.A. in particular, requires that energetic interaction become an integral part of our mission, vision, and values, not only as a

commitment to working with external partners, but also as a guiding principle for teaching and learning. We know that *active* learning environments—permeated with curricular, pedagogical, and technological innovation—develop more accomplished and enthusiastic students. We know that local communities can thrive when the university is a hub for applied research, scholarship, and artistry that create new solutions and visions, and move students into fulfilling and accomplished lives. And we know that these accomplishments are not possible without reaching out to business, industry, education, and government, and involving and inspiring the best and brightest of the university’s faculty and staff. As we move forward, we will need to create an atmosphere of shared enthusiasm for charting the future of the university, and for making Cal State L.A. the key engine for social and economic mobility. We need strong partnerships with the city and the region, and the visibility that showcases our dedication and accomplishments, so that we can continue to grow as a university, and to more fully serve our students.

We will achieve this by adding new faculty and staff positions that advance our civic mission: and by focusing, reorganizing, and streamlining our administrative ranks to provide mission-focused and exemplary leadership. An essential first step in this direction is the addition of one new leadership position: Vice President for Engagement and Economic Development. The person in this position will be charged with strengthening existing networks and creating new ones that engage the City, and the region, with our University; with helping us to identify urban and regional challenges that we can and should address together; with developing partnerships that support and enhance both our academic and civic mission and resources; with identifying funding for

research and scholarship that serves the public good; and with leading new and forward-looking initiatives that contribute to workforce development and the quality of life in Los Angeles and beyond. I've asked Jose Gomez, who is currently Associate Vice President for Administration and Finance, to step into this position, and to work with faculty, staff, and administrative colleagues, along with leaders in the public and private sectors, to chart the ways in which he can best serve our common interests and strengths. He will also work with the current Vice Presidents and others on reorganizing and consolidating the university's engagement and external affairs programs, where that makes sense, in order to both control administrative costs and to strengthen our critical engagement and economic development opportunities in the region and beyond. He will begin this position today, and will also serve as my Chief of Staff. As many of you know, and as many around the State have told me, Vice President Gomez is very well suited to this position. Prior to joining CSULA in 2009, Vice President Gomez held senior positions in the California Legislature, Department of Justice, and State Treasurer's Office, including serving as Executive Director of California's higher education facilities financing authority and student loan agency. He is a political scientist with expertise in California policy and politics, including a keen understanding of the social and economic landscape of Southern California. I trust that you will welcome Vice President Gomez with your support, advice, and energy, as he begins to enrich this important dimension of our mission.

Our paramount emphasis here at Cal State L.A. will continue to be instruction that leads to success, in the context of the university's well-recognized commitment to intellectual and cultural diversity and inclusion, without which true learning cannot take place. The

strong faculty research and scholarship here at Cal State L.A. is essential to exemplary instruction, provides for the engagement of students in knowledge-making, and ensures that they are learning from the best and the brightest. As we all know, in addition to providing a great faculty, we need to provide the classes that move students toward graduation, so my request to the Provost, the Deans, and the faculty, simple and straightforward, is that we offer a schedule of classes that meets the needs of degree seeking students. Additional funding may be required to provide cost-effective, high quality instruction that reduces the time to degree for our students, and securing this funding will be a high priority.

As the complex challenges and vast opportunities of the 21st century present themselves, we should make certain that our academic programs are not only built on solid intellectual and disciplinary foundations, but also, and more importantly, that they prepare students for future opportunities. To this end, I've asked the Provost to work with the faculty on a "visioning" initiative that both builds upon and renews our curriculum. I will invite proposals for both degree programs and new faculty and staff positions that anticipate the future and serve the public good—programs that address the ways in which culture, education, industry, business, health, livelihood, and citizenship are being transformed by the forces of technology, globalization, and interdisciplinary synergy. With these new programs and professors in place within our already strong curriculum, we can better prepare students to be important participants in new ways of thinking and working that issue from ongoing social and cultural change.

We have a great deal to celebrate, and a great deal to do. Today, we launch a three-year process for converting our quarter calendar to a semester calendar. This will

involve everyone in the campus community, and provide the faculty the opportunity to transform the curriculum in ways that maintain currency and rigor, while also providing an engaging learning environment that leads to greater student success. Rennie Schoepflin, currently Associate Dean in the College of Natural and Social Sciences, has agreed to serve as Director of our Conversion efforts. Rennie, your reputation as a great colleague and leader precedes you, and gives me great confidence that you will keep all of us energized and on task. Thank you for agreeing to lead the charge. Today we also have with us Dr. Jeri Echeverria, who is coordinating semester conversion for the CSU, and will be sitting in on presentations and discussions throughout the day.

As we consider together how best to chart the future course of Cal State L.A., and how best to tell the story of our achievements and our dreams, I'm going to be doing a lot of listening. I've begun to pay visits to all of the Colleges, meet with members of the presidential search advisory committee, and talk with a wide range of volunteers, donors, and alumni who love this university and care deeply about its future. I plan to attend every academic senate meeting that my schedule allows. This makes for pretty full days, but engaging with you is well worth it. I'll be inviting some of you to join me for lunch over the coming weeks and months. Whenever I see a free lunch hour on the calendar, my office will invite a few of you to meet me at the University Club, where we can share a meal and you can tell me what's on your mind. In this way, we continue the spirit of convocation, the spirit of coming together. And I will enjoy the great pleasure of getting to know you better.

I'm going to take some questions now, but first, let me wish you a successful and rewarding fall quarter, and thank you once again for all that you do to make this a great university, and for welcoming both Debbie and me to Cal State L.A.