The Great River

The day before Kelley and I started working at Winona State, we were at an AASCU conference in Santa Fe. Not too far from the hotel flowed the Santa Fe River. Anybody here been to Santa Fe? What’s your assessment of the river? The Santa Fe River flows the way a raindrop flows down a filament in a spider’s web.

But I’ve seen real rivers!

Back in 1995, I had co-written a Young Scholars grant proposal funded by NSF and they sent a group of us to a conference at Saint Michael’s College in Burlington, Vermont. (Michael is often depicted holding a flaming sword.) I can’t remember now if this was one of those PKAL Kaleidoscope conferences, but if not it was along those lines – the pedagogy of science. You know: inquiry-based methods. Do any members of the faculty here use inquiry-based teaching?

The workshop wanted to expose us to new methods, and the pedagogy focused on the Winooski River. We were divided into teams. My team’s assignment was to measure the “surge” of the river – the amount of force or power the river exerted. We were given a tape measure, tennis balls, and a stop watch. We timed the ball over a certain distance at the surface, then created neutral buoyancy and timed it at different depths in the river. We compared our notes afterwards with others who were logging flora and fauna, testing pH, and so on, and drew conclusions about the river from a multidisciplinary perspective.

We learned a lot that day. If knowledge was the sword given to King Arthur, then it was like the Lady of the Lake was lying in the Winooski River, and she handed us a little symbol of knowledge, a sword, a little Excalibur, not only to learn about the river, but to learn about learning.

The life of the mind is often associated with water, but that's another story.
The Santa Fe wasn’t much of a river. The Winooski was impressive, but I hadn’t seen anything yet.

This is the great river. By “this is the great river,” I don’t mean the Mississippi per se, I mean that we are the great river. Learning is a river, and we are that great river, great at being that river, and we have been, are, and will continue to be great.

The less figurative among us will note that we are certainly in the river – we are certainly a part of the river – and that’s right. Most of you know that Winona is actually in the Mississippi River. Once upon a time, there was a lot more water here. The Mississippi was deeper and wider. As the glaciers melted and the flood waters receded, the sediment piled up here, hundreds of feet above the original river bottom. The island that is Winona is part of these sediments. And the valley is still forming. Rain and wind and ice still move the sandstone and siltstone.¹

Water formed us, carved us out -- and like water we have formed and carved out an unparalleled force of learning. Water forms and carves. Learning forms and carves.

We and the river have joined forces. We and the river are one. With our friends in the community, we and the river together forge the future of this place.

But I don’t only mean literally that we are in the river or on the river ... I mean figuratively that we are the river. If you don’t believe that we are the river then you need to revisit the Science Lab Center atrium, where you can see the water molecule above you, see the sediment carved out around you, see your fellow river creatures swimming amidst the islands while dreaming of the stars.

We’re not just “a” river – we’re “the” river – the great river! We are a force, powerful and good and independent, that carves out a pathway of knowledge in the wilderness of ignorance.

In Arthurian legends, water is associated with leadership and with wisdom. The water is the knowledge. The Lady of the Lake confers a symbol of that wisdom and leadership through the sword. And we do the same. This university is like water, and we offer symbols of knowledge throughout the journey, like diplomas. No one is predestined to hold this knowledge – it is a gift to all.

If you know your Arthurian legend, then you know that in many tellings of the tale, the sword Excalibur has a message etched on its blade. What embodiment of wisdom would be complete without a message? And so it is for us. An arm clad in “purest shimmering samite”\(^2\) holds forth the sword from the water, and here is what is inscribed on its blade:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nos sunt communitas} \\
\text{Nos sunt discentium} \\
\text{Nos meliorem mundi}
\end{align*}
\]

Translated into English, the inscription says:

We are a community
We are learners
We improve our world

\(^2\) A reference to the film “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” for Provost Nancy Jannik.
We are a Community

This has two meanings:

1. The community within: those of us who study and work at Winona State.
2. The community without: those whom we serve in the community and across the state through partnerships, service learning, volunteerism, and so on.

Let’s talk about the Community Within. We need to seek a common understanding of our purpose and direction. This will help us continue our leadership role. How do we do that? How do we promote the best possible community within? Here’s how I believe we do that:

1. Sharing Governance – the best ideas are out there, not in here. Together we will find them. I’ve only had three really great ideas ever and one of them was to marry Kelley and another was to move here.

2. Promoting Transparency – we owe it to each other to be open and honest.

3. Embracing Dissent – I believe in the utility of the Hegelian dialectic: truth is revealed through the encounter of different diverse perspectives that synthesize. Disagreement is not just okay … disagreement is essential! According to the research of Charlan Nemeth at UC Berkeley, creativity is enhanced by debate and disagreement.\(^3\)

4. Honoring civility, even amidst dissent -- it’s okay to challenge ideas, but it’s not okay to attack people. No *ad hominem* attacks, please. This is not easy but we HAVE to get this right!

5. Valuing Diversity – this is a challenge for us, something the HLC recognized as a weakness. If we believe in the marketplace of ideas and believe in dissent and debate, then we need to have different voices and perspectives around us. In addition to a strong moral component, diversity has a strong practical component.

We have been so successful at educating our undergraduate students. Generally speaking, we are the best in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System and one of the best

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\(^3\) Nemeth, C. (2012). *Creative problem solving: Outsiders, dissenters, heroes and rogues.* Unpublished presentation at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities Summer Meeting, Santa Fe, NM.
in the state at this. But the success has not been shared among all of our students. We represent the promise to so many for access and opportunity, but low income students and students from underrepresented minorities have struggled. Success here should not depend on family wealth or gender or race – success should be open to all.

But what we know from the NSSE and A2S Education Trust data is that all of our students do not have the same experience of Winona State. For example, while our six year graduation rate for European-American students is 55%, for African-American students the rate is 32%. We can do better.

So, to ensure the highest quality of our undergraduate experience, we need to focus on access, success, and completion of all students, but given the differential, especially of underrepresented students. Every Winona State student should feel welcomed and supported and have full access to the excellence we offer.

As we build community within, we need to conclude many searches for leadership positions. We have a lot of interims at the moment. I’ll look forward to conversations at the Meet and Confers about how many searches we can do in one year and how best to order them. My goal is first to resolve the question of the two Cabinet-level interim positions, then move on to the Dean-level interims and beyond. I hope to get the major questions resolved by the end of the next cycle of Meet and Confer and get some of the searches started soon thereafter.

Hopefully we can attract some strong interest because you have already built a great community here.

You chose this path because of your passion to improve our world and your belief that education improves the world better than anything else. You chose the most noble path ... helping others to achieve their dreams. So, what are OUR hopes and dreams? In the next few weeks I hope to begin conversations on campus about our hopes and dreams, to use them as a basis for envisioning where we will flow.
Those conversations are not only for the Community Within, but also for the Community Without. They have hopes and dreams for us, too. After all, ”Winona” is the first word in our name. We are known nationally for civic engagement and service learning. The world out there craves to work with us, learn from us, partner with us. The world out there is wise to see us this way!

So we need to be a part of this community, this beautiful Winona community, serving it every way we practically can, learning from it as it learns from us. And this commitment should not stop here. We already serve Rochester well. Can we serve it even better? And that’s still not where it stops. Minnesota is counting on us. America is counting on us. The world is counting on us. These are all our community.

As I learned from the diversity of flora and fauna in the Winooski, rivers are a community. My question is: If we are a great river of knowledge, then where will community flow next?

**We are Learners**

Part of what makes us such a powerful force for good is that we are the “People’s University” – we belong to everyone. We are great at what we do! And this is not mere self-assertion. (Micha-el’s name means “who is like God?” and his sword is a sword of humility!) We know this objectively and through external validation, such as:

- High NSSE scores
- An affirming HLC review
- Powerful Persistence Rates
- Leading Graduation Rates
- Strong enrollment despite declining high school student numbers
- Strengthening financial position, with the worst fiscal challenges apparently behind us and Winona State prospering more strongly than any other state university.

The drought is behind us.
So, what is our essence as learners, and where does the river flow next? We are already superb at the undergraduate experience. Therefore, we must extend the promise of our excellence in undergraduate education, and remain the best by innovating with quality in mind. We must ensure that students who come here are able to succeed here, regardless of family wealth, ethnicity, gender, or anything else.

We must ensure that we remain technology leaders. This has been one of our defining attributes and it needs to remain so. By carving out technology as a marker of distinction we have set a high bar for ourselves, and we must remain national leaders in a high-speed, evolving technology environment. Technology helps us find the answer, but it isn’t the answer itself. And therein lies our ultimate victory. How do we compete with TED and the Khan Academy and iTunes University? According to Roberta Ness, we can provide something more than content: we can provide context.\(^4\) We can coach students to learn how to learn, to adapt, grow, and innovate. This is not just about technology, though technology is a powerful tool. This is about creating a robust learning environment.

Our commitment to sustainability must continue. Our theme house just opened. If you ever doubt its importance, please meet the students who are living there. Our commitment to civic engagement and volunteerism must continue. Our students are beloved, and we are too. These markers of distinction must continue to define us even as we look for new ways to innovate and express them.

At the undergraduate level, students must have a grounding in the liberal arts and sciences regardless of their major. I believe that there is no intrinsic conflict between liberal studies and the professions. Each has its place in this academy. Employers tell us that they value both. The professions are how we make our living, and the liberal arts and sciences tell us how to live our lives.

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We already offer outstanding graduate education in selected areas. We have shown we can do this with high quality and without damming up the undergraduate mission. We must seek out a few select, distinctive, high quality, relevant and responsive graduate programs that meet the needs of Minnesota and that can be delivered in ways that best serve students. I think some of these are already in development, and others are being imagined.

We must reframe the way we think about learning lest our river stop flowing. Let’s say we already provide the finest learning experience that is. Let’s not ask “do we provide the finest education that is?” but, given our constraints, let’s ask “do we provide the finest education that can be?” Because we are learners, we should not rest on a verdant shore, at the end of the trail, even though we have surely earned the right to do so, but we should put the boat back in the river and go exploring again. Only in doing so will we remain the leaders that we have been.

In short, being a “Community of Learners” means doing everything we can to deliver the highest quality education with the highest value – the best deal in Minnesota, and the best investment in the future that a person can make.

Rivers learn. So, my question is: If we are a great river of knowledge, then where will learning flow next?

We Improve our World

This means that we are willing to improve inside and out, first improving how and what we do, then using those improvements to help build a better world. I suppose that there are three counterproductive ways to think about improvement, innovation, and change:

1. We are powerless, nothing we do matters, so change and improvement are not possible.
2. We have power, but we need to blow everything up and start over from scratch.
3. We have power, but we are already the best at what we do, so change is bad.
Let’s look at each of these.

We might think that we are powerless to do anything. We were blessed with fantastic performances of “King Lear” this summer at the Shakespeare Festival. In Act I, Scene II, Edmund makes fun of those who feel powerless and blame their fate on others, in particular fate imposed from above:

Edmund:  
_This is the excellent foppery of the world,_

_that, when we are sick in fortune,_

_often the surfeit of our own behavior,_

_we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars;_

_as if we were villains ... on necessity;_

_fools ... by heavenly compulsion ...^5_

Many folks feel this way these days. Maybe some of us feel this way. We have come through very challenging times, times when budgets were slashed and our common future drawn into doubt. But how could we of all people believe that we are powerless? Of course as individuals and together we sometimes lack power, but isn’t the very core of our enterprise the belief that education transforms – that learning makes the world better, helps improve our world? Isn’t this a core shared belief for us – that wisdom is the gift we bring?

Our budget picture has improved considerably. There are opportunities to reinvest. We have a Chancellor who invites us to be distinctive. We have the people of Winona, Rochester, and others behind us, willing to help. We are not powerless.

Or, we might think that we should utterly abandon the past, start over, re-route the river like the “Mr. Go” (MRGO) canal in New Orleans. We don’t know a lot about the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, but we do have this wonderful quote from him ...

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Ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers.6

That phrasing is kind of cryptic, so here is how Plato rephrases Heraclitus:

All things move and nothing remains still.7

Everything changes … and you cannot step into the same stream twice.8

Here is a vision of a river we do not want to be: constant, ceaseless reinvention.

Change is certainly a constant and appears unceasing, but change is never purely chaotic. Some changes can be predicted, like the decline in birthrate in industrialized countries, and what that might mean for enrollments. Given how excellent we are, Winona State has no call to blow things up and start over! So much of what we do is best-in-class that we need to honor our traditions. Improvement at Winona State cannot mean the abandonment of all we have been. Heraclitus’s river is chaos. And some climatologists think that re-routing the Mississippi through Mr. Go brought chaos to New Orleans.9

Or, we might believe that we must not change a thing: that we should repeat what we always have done and preserve tradition. This is the opposite perspective from Heraclitus.

I don’t understand much of James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, but I know he is playing with repetition. The opening sentence says:

riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back ...10

6 Heraclitus, Praeperatio evangelica, 15.20.2

7 Plato, Cratylus, 401d.

8 Plato, Cratylus, 402a.


“Commodius vicus” seems to mean “vicious circle.” Here is a portrait of another river we do not want to be. Joyce is true to his word because the novel itself is a vicious circle ... the novel ends ...

A way a lone a last a loved a long the ... ¹¹

... which loops back to the beginning ...

A way a lone a last a loved a long the ... riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore ...

Here’s another example of that thinking from the Bruce Springsteen song “The River”:

I come from down in the valley where mister when you're young
They bring you up to do like your daddy done ...
We’d go down to the river
And into the river we’d dive.
Down to the river we’d ride. ¹²

Here, the river represents repetition, not change. In this view, we are condemned to do what those who came before us did. But that’s not right, either. We did not become who we are by staying in place. Three of our great markers of distinction—digital technology, sustainability, and civic engagement—would not have been our markers 20 years ago.

So, I want to encourage us to think of our great river neither as powerless, nor as chaotic, nor as repetitious. Is that the choice? Either we are powerless to do anything, or we are obliged to do everything, or we are condemned to repeat ourselves? There’s always another way.

And right here in Minnesota we have an example. Does anybody remember the old Paul Bunyan-land on the corner of Highways 371 and 210 near Brainerd? They used to sell a book there full of Paul Bunyan tall tales, printed by the folks at the Brainerd Daily Dispatch. I still have a copy. In one of these stories Paul’s lumberjacks are frustrated when floating their lumber downstream. Rather than flowing down to Winona, the lumber keeps coming back to the same spot because it’s a circular river – it just flows in a circle. (This is Paul Bunyan meets M.C. Escher I think.) So, Paul takes a huge shovel, scoops out the middle, and makes “Round Lake” which is just a few miles north of Paul Bunyan-land toward Nisswa.

We are not powerless. We can change the world. We can bring innovation without bringing chaos. And that change can move us forward in new ways while also respecting our traditions. We can preserve the past and make something new. Rather than thinking of change as a straight line or a circle, in terms of metaphor, how about change as a helix? A river empowered, preserving its shape and traditions, but also innovative and new. Always moving forward, yet also always returning to familiar parts of the curve. Innovation plus tradition.

We preserve our cycles and rhythms, we preserve our way of doing things, but we always strive to make things new and fresh, like a river. We can do things that are new while preserving our traditions. We can go about things the way our forebears did – with integrity, passion, community commitment – but we can change and grow too. These are not in conflict. These go side by side. We can innovate and improve not because we have to, but because we are so strong that we choose to!

How do we do this? Looking only inward is good for preserving traditions but not for innovation. We have to look out as we look in. Improving our world means a willingness to partner with those whom we serve. Where appropriate, this means partnering with our community, with K12 schools, with businesses and industry, with nonprofit organizations, with our colleagues Southeast Tech and RCTC and Riverland and other sibling institutions.
If we take diversity seriously, then we must partner in ways that help us serve our students in the ways they most need to be served. We can absolutely do this without compromising our quality and identity here at home in Winona. This is one way of improving our world.

We should be the most respected and valued partner in higher education: "we LOVE to work with Winona State!" just as I’ve heard so many of you say, “I love to work at Winona State.”

Look around you and please never take any of this for granted: This beautiful campus, this beautiful city, this beautiful state. We benefit from these in untold ways. We have a duty to honor and preserve them, stewarding the next 150 years. All that we do here is possible because of the river, both the figurative river and the literal river. You built this: you, the river. The purpose of normal schools was to change the world through education. That was there from the beginning, and that hasn’t changed. We are, at heart, still that normal school, still changing lives every day through education.

Rivers improve our world. So, my question for you is: If we are a great river of knowledge, then where will “improving our world” flow next?

The river has left its mark on this valley. Humans sometimes leave a mark, and sometimes leave just a marker. On the Island of Santorini there is a relic from 2,600 years ago, a 1,000-pound Volcanic stone with this message carved on it: “Eumastas, son of Kritobolos, lifted me up from the ground.”13 Who was Eumastas? Who was Kristobolos? Who knows? All we have is the marker. Or think of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias”:

_Nothing beside remains. Round the decay_
_Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,_
The lone and level sands stretch far away.14

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All that’s left around that marker is just a dry, sandy waste – not a fertile valley. Markers of nothing. Signifiers with no signified.

Will we leave a mark, or a marker? 150 years from now, will our descendants look back on us and wonder who we were and what we did? Or will they look back on us and say, thank heaven for those Warriors! Thank heaven that they improved the world that we inherited!

The river left its marker and left its mark, and like Winona State the river is still here. We will both be here for a long time to come. As you know, there’s a statue on the mall called *End of The Trail* by James Earle Fraser, a Winona native. You’ll see this same image on the cover of the Beach Boys album “Surf’s Up.” As usual, Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks are writing about water! Trails might end at the edge of the river. They don’t end because we have no place else to go. They end because we are at the riverside, and the river can take us to places far beyond this trail, places we haven’t even imagined. The end of one trail is the beginning of another trail.

The surf is up again – the river is ready to roar. It will sweep away ignorance. It will make the valley green and fertile. And we can make a paradise of learning here between these bluffs.

The river invites us to explore, to learn. Mary Shelley describes learning as precisely this type of adventure in her novel “The Last Man”:

> I have chosen my boat, and laid in my scant stores. I have selected a few books; the principal are Homer and Shakespeare. But the libraries of the world are thrown open to me ... and in any port I can renew my stock. \(^{15}\)

We can go anywhere.

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You have chosen the noblest profession, all of you. Whether you teach in the classroom or provide frontline service to students or maintain these beautiful buildings and grounds, or sit behind a counter or desk or on a tractor or stand behind a lectern or with a rake or broom in your hands. You have chosen the noblest profession: helping others realize their dreams, helping others put their boat in the river and explore. Each of us does this. All of us do this together.

It doesn’t matter what job you do here – we are all part of the river and we all help students realize their dreams. We all do!

You’re all part of the river ...

All the professors are part of the flow,
Service faculty, with all that you know,
Student Affairs, Advancement, and Res Life,
(I live in Lourdes Hall with Kelley, my wife)
Office assistants and student workers
In ITS there sure are no shirkers.
GMWs, Facilities crew,
What do you know? Administrators too.

Somsen, Gildemeister, Kryszko, Minné,
Maxwell and Pasteur, now what do you say?
Phelps and Krueger and Wabasha and Stark,
Gathering down at the river, and hark!
Every student who’s willing will ride
With us together in this rising tide.
All of us together, every IFO, ASF, AFSCME, MAPE, MMA, MSUSA, ABC, 123, Do Re Mi, Baby you and me! We are a community, we are learners, and we improve our world.

What great place will community discover next? What great place will learning discover next? What great place will “improving our world” discover next? If our thoughts and passions and beliefs and actions align, we can flow anywhere we want to go. If our minds and our hearts and our spirits and our hands work together, we can achieve anything.

We are the great river. We can stand in the Science Lab Center atrium and feel a part of it – surrounded by water molecules and sediment, creatures of that clean, deep, strong force. You know, nationally there is a drought. Nationally, more than half of all counties are without water, the highest proportion ever. But not here. Here, the valley is green. Here, the river is rising. Here the water will wash away all the pain, wash away all the hurt, wash away the ignorance, wash away all the dreams unfulfilled. Warriors, trouble the water!

The river is rising with hope. The river is rising with abundance. The river is rising with opportunity. The river is rising with wisdom. The river is rising with dreams. So, come on students, let’s go down, let’s go down, let’s go down! Let’s go down to the river today!

As for the Lady of the Lake: The Lake is Lake Pepin. The Lady is Princess We-No-Nah. She lives! She jumped into Lake Pepin from Maiden Rock but she lives, like us she became one with the water, flowing downstream, making her home here, where she waits. We-no-nah offers knowledge like a flaming sword to all who seek it.

Despite all the adversity, knowledge lives. The sword of knowledge is truly magical. According to Thomas Malory, it’s "... so bright in the eyes of the enemy that it gave light like
The flame of knowledge here in Winona burns so brightly that the water doesn't diminish it – in fact, the water acts as a prism and beautifully refracts Winona's knowledge in hundreds of ways.

Wade in the water and the Lady in the Lake will greet you ... the sword of knowledge lies in her hands, in Winona's hands, in the water ... waiting for you to claim it, knowledge yours for the taking! Look at the top of our logo – the “Flaming W” – and you will see its brilliance. 150 years? That’s nothing! “Til every river it runs dry ... ‘til every star falls down from the sky ...”20 We can do this together. We will do this together. Knowledge is a river, powerful, ageless and new. We’re a community of learners and, like a great river, we improve our world.

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