The purpose of the Academic Positioning for the Future at the University of Northern Iowa, as I noted in my April email to the campus community, is “to create conditions under which excellence in teaching and learning, scholarship, and service can flourish into the future. This conversation will allow us to engage our past and to prepare for our future while supporting the mission and values of UNI and creating a culture of innovation and resilience.

We need to provide a strong foundation for our current programs, including the liberal arts, and develop a list of new programs that we might add over the next ten years that will increase our enrollment. And we need to think about our academic structure and the way in which our structure can facilitate high quality learning opportunities....the conversation will be transparent, inclusive and collaborative, offering opportunities for feedback and consultation along the way.”

The process will be deliberative and the timeline will be responsive to the necessities of the process as it unfolds.

This is the work before us in its broadest sense, and you will hear more about the processes and structures for this work in a moment. Even within what you hear there will be purposeful ambiguity for the process must shape itself out of the emergent reality, filled with possibility, that unfolds from our community.

Overlaying this work, or, perhaps, undergirding this work of Academic Positioning is a deeper purpose, for this work is not merely about the future thriving of the University of Northern Iowa. It is, more capaciously, about the future thriving of our community, our state and even our nation, a future thriving that can only be fully realized if higher education does its part in fulfilling its forgotten public purpose.

As Lynn Pasquerella, President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, stated, we need to write an “ascendant narrative” that “make[s] visible the transformative power” of higher education, and especially of the liberal arts. We have sat too long on the sidelines and allowed our work to be defined by others. Now is the time for us to reclaim the narrative. But to do so, we must begin by reinventing ourselves.

Cathy Davidson, distinguished professor at the City University of New York and founding director of the Futures Initiative, stated in the latest edition of Liberal Education, “We need a revolution in the Copernican sense: a fundamental change in the way we think about the purpose of higher education. Implicitly, now, our majors and minors are designed to replicate the professoriate. Professors train students the way they were trained, in specializations that have been developed in our academic fields and not necessarily in skills and specializations that map onto the needs of the contemporary world our students are inheriting.”

As we think about the public purpose of higher education, we need to refocus on its three primary, historical components:

(1) Providing access to a wide range of students with appropriate systems and structures to ensure each and every one of them has the opportunity for academic success;
(2) Cultivating a learning environment both inside and outside the classroom that ensures our students’ professional success; and
(3) Nurturing among our students an active engagement as citizens that ensures the success of our experiment in democracy, an experiment that continues unfulfilled when women, minorities, our LGBTQIA community, immigrants and many others do not have equal rights or equal opportunities.

What I would contend is that the achievement of these three purposes of higher education are really about one thing, about one body of work that we must commit ourselves to: the development of the whole person in our students. That is, we must commit ourselves to:

- the development of the Intellectual Capacities of our students, their habits of mind—including their critical thinking skills, problem solving abilities, communication, curiosity, judgment, and independent thinking.
- the development of the social-emotional capacities, their habits of heart—including such things as care and compassion, honesty and integrity, justice, deep listening, humility, and gratitude.
- the development of the psychological capacities of our students, their habits of spirit—including such things as resilience and persistence, determination, confidence balanced with humility, open-mindedness and collaboration, courage, and patience. And, finally,
- the development of the civic capacities of our students—their engagement with a wide variety of communities, a recognition of their responsibilities as citizens, and a sense of civic purpose.

To realize this deeper purpose of Academic Positioning for the Future, which depends upon realizing the public purpose of higher education through the development of the whole person, we must rethink what we do.

To develop the whole person depends less on the major or discipline students engage and more on a set of experiences that they encounter, intentionally and developmentally, which faculty and staff have purposefully crafted.

The experiences that the future will require of our students include:

1. true cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking and knowing of the world
2. engagement with real world problems in real world settings, and
3. collaboration that allows students to become aware of, and set aside, their ways of knowing the world in order to innovate, create, and lead.

This final point—collaboration—deserves some unpacking as it is also at the heart of this endeavor of Academic Positioning. If we simply engage with others who think the same way we do, who have similar life experiences, who do not vary from us in our politics or religion or socio-economic status, the collaboration will be easy and we will remain comfortable. And we will not learn or grow or innovate.

For collaboration to become impactful, students must engage with individuals who come from diverse backgrounds, have diverse perspectives on the world, diverse politics, religious views, socio-economic backgrounds…who are different in a wide variety of ways.

When our students experience a learning environment that allows them to know from within a disciplinary framework but that simultaneously allows them to know the shortcomings of that
framework; that offers opportunities to test what they are learning by engaging real world problems; and that expects them to collaborate with diverse individuals on finding solutions, then they will be prepared for the future.

This deeper purpose of Academic Positioning, to rethink higher education, will depend upon us as a community doing what we ask of our students:

1. to suspend the disciplinary frameworks and mental models that we bring with us to this task
2. to presence a deeper truth from a future that is beckoning and that will emerge if we open ourselves to a larger purpose, and
3. to realize a new reality that depends upon the latent interconnectedness of self and world.

A rich life in the 21st century will be marked less by proficiency in a narrow field or discipline—by knowing the stuff of a major, as important as this is—and more by the ability to be aware of the limitations of our own thinking, to sense a deeper pattern or source of becoming, and thus to engage complex and systemic challenges. The problems we face at this time and that we will face in increasing ways as the century unfolds will take:

- a new kind of moral imagination that marries tradition and innovation, that accepts what is valuable in the past at the same time that it opens the mind to the possibilities of the future
- a new kind of moral courage that balances humility and confidence, that recognizes the power and limitations of the self and the interconnectedness of all things, and
- a new kind of moral being that allows us to presence our unique and undivided self in a community that learns to welcome those unique selves, no matter how different they are from our own.

This work of Academic Positioning for the Future, then, is about more than developing new majors or programs or curriculum or structures. We will do these things during the course of our work as they are the concrete manifestations of the deeper work we will do.

But that deeper work must be before us at all times: to become an agent, a node, a conduit that draws our community from our known and perhaps not fully adequate current reality to an emergent reality filled with possibility.

Let me emphasize, in closing. This is not about telling our story better. We must tell a more compelling story, but to do so we must first realign our work and rethink our purpose.

The story we tell must be worthy of the aspirations and complex futures of our students—and the ways in which we will prepare them for success.

It is likewise about the fragile and incomplete nature of our democracy—and the way in which higher education must recommit to championing that democracy.

Thank you so much for coming. I look forward to our work together.