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Distinguished Professor Convocation Address, 2002

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Elizabeth Lane Furdell

Distinguished Professor
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Maybe because I come from the Pacific Northwest, I've always thought of myself as a pioneer of sorts, willing to venture with confidence into less-charted waters. Women got the vote first out west and westerners elected the first female politicians to state and national offices. With that pioneer heritage, I was inspired to carve out a career for myself and can claim to be the first female in my education-oriented family to get a terminal degree, teach at the college level, and publish books. However intrepid my self-image, I'm not the first female to win the Distinguished Professor Award at the University of North Florida. Three women preceded me to the honor and with two wins in a row for UNF's distaff faculty, we girls are on something of a streak. I'm not even the first Betty to win it; the late Bette Soldwedel deserves that distinction. But I AM the first married woman to stand before you as a Distinguished Professor. Over the years I've heard the male winners of this award thank their wives for typing their papers, chauffeuring the kids to school and soccer, and keeping the household running while having nourishing meals on the table every day. Well, I'M that wife and I accept this honor in the name of all the married women on the faculty and staff at UNF. Imagine what we could accomplish if we had wives like us!

When I realized that speaking at Convocation was one of the "prizes" for becoming Distinguished Professor, many possible topics crossed my mind. I pride myself on being a bibliophile, a voracious reader of all genres. Growing up an only child in rainy Seattle, what else could I do but read? No wonder the city has the nation's highest per capita book ownership. My appetite for reading widely was whetted by an excellent liberal arts education at the University of Washington with broadly-based distribution requirements that made me sample a dazzling variety of courses, the subjects of which remain favorites of my leisure-time activity to this day. Even as a child, I read lots of history, the most catholic of disciplines. Nothing escapes the historian's interest: politics, the arts, weather, even disease gets scrutinized in the quest for understanding the past. Real reading pleasure and growth, however, often come from pages outside one's field of specialization. I routinely devour books of all stripes, many in concert with my dear friends in the Glamour Dog Book Club, a 15-year association of inveterate readers of both fiction and non-fiction. I urge my incredulous students to read beyond their course assignments, to read for fun in fields that have nothing to do with their jobs. Now that Oprah has abdicated her position as the nation's most influential reader, I contemplated a talk in praise of book exploration. But with all of Jacksonville embarking on a community read of "To Kill a Mockingbird" and plenty of celebrity newcomers nominating their favorite tomes, I concluded, hopefully, that promoting reading beyond what is required to stay current in one's field would be redundant.

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I next thought about discussing my current research interest: a history of diabetes. It's scholarship, after all these years, that keeps this Distinguish Professor from being extinguished! Prompted by the startling news that "adult onset" or type 2 diabetes has reached epidemic proportions in the western world, even among juveniles, I have begun to investigate the historical record of the disease, the therapies proposed for its treatment, and the lives led by those afflicted. As luck would have it, two 17th-century English doctors whom I have profiled in earlier works figured prominently in diagnosing diabetics, theorizing about the causes of the ailment, and prescribing medicines and regimens for its cure. One of these medical paladins, Thomas Willis, determined that diabetics sloughed off sugar, not salt, and chronicled the awful symptoms of diabetic decline in a nobleman who was his patient. The other, Thomas Sydenham, an abstemious Puritan, argued that the increasing incidence of diabetes among his contemporaries was due to over-indulgence in food and drink. From this nucleus, I hope to expand my inquiry backward and forward in time, assaying the entire history of the disease including the current debate over a lifetime of insulin-dependency versus pancreas transplants for type 1 diabetics. It is a big project, to be sure, so perhaps you'd better wait for the book to appear.

Several Distinguished Professors of the recent past have used this forum to point out some of the institution's problems and to offer suggestions for improvements at UNF. It's not that I don't have plenty to say. I could rail against the political powers that be for initially categorizing UNF as a third-tier institution and then breaking up the State University System altogether, setting us afloat alone in parlous times. I feel very strongly that UNF must go beyond reliance on self-nomination for administrative positions and actively recruit successful teacher-scholars to be chairs, deans, and directors. I think the Honors Program grew too fast but the number of faculty-staff parking spots not fast enough. I may be distinguished, but I can't even buy designated! I miss my paper pay stub, too. Given the serious, nation-wide economic crisis facing higher education, however, I'm opting not to critique the university or its stewards. This just doesn't feel like a moment for righteous outrage, especially as UNF finds itself in a multi-faceted transition. What would be the result of expressing my personal indignation anyway or the chance that anything could be done to fix things without adequate financial capital? UNF is hardly alone in confronting diminished state funding and a resource-challenged educational mission. Besides, I am too happy today to grouse about anything.

Instead, I'm here to offer thanks for the opportunities UNF has given me to fashion a successful academic life and to exhort the rest of you to take advantage of whatever comes your professional way at this institution. If being distinguished means, I hope you'll agree, more than just surviving into one's academic dotage, then you can ratchet up your own resume as I did, by using programs to attain your goals. I came to Florida after teaching for over a decade in Montana when UNF was transforming itself into a conventional four-year institution and needed instructors with experience teaching underclassmen. I brought more than experience with me; my two young sons were in tow and the university helped me, then a single parent, to succeed at my new job. The

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UNF Child Development Center took my younger son under its nurturing wing and prepared him for kindergarten. Having labored under a 9-course teaching load in Montana, I felt liberated by the 3-3 arrangement here and crafted a serious scholarly agenda for myself. Along the way, I availed myself of usually dependable travel funding to go to libraries for research and conferences to float the results of that research. Moreover, because FSU's London Program was then open to UNF faculty, I was able to spend a whole semester in England with both my boys attending school while I taught a couple of courses and mined the archives. After nearly 20 years in the business, UNF gave me the first sabbatical of my career in 1990 and another in 1997; no such relief from the classroom had been available to me at the college in Montana. With growing children to tend to, I couldn't get across the pond or even down to Gainesville too often, but UNF's Inter-Library Loan service procured all the primary and secondary sources I could ask for, an invaluable boost to my scholarly productivity. Technological instruction for faculty and staff helped me learn more about computer applications. Avail yourself of these benefits when you have the chance. Programs may come and go, so apply for even the most evanescent if it is open to you. And what about the summer research grants at UNF? Two such awards made it possible for me to complete one book and to start another without the onus of 6-week course teaching. I am very appreciative for that investment in me and happy that I have been able to deliver a consistent string of publications. But let me make this absolutely clear: UNF must continue to spotlight scholarship, not just technological know-how, as a necessary feature for faculty success. Substantive, sophisticated instruction is impossible without an active research life, notwithstanding last year's myopic bonus criteria that excluded scholarship from the meritorious. And UNF must preserve its 3-3 teaching load for its productive scholars.

UNF also gave me the chance to shine in the classroom, not that I hadn't already honed my pedagogical skills in Montana, teaching everything from political science courses to geography, as well as western civ. When I came on board permanently in 1984, I was able to devise a curriculum that suited my strengths and training. For the first time, I could teach courses specifically in British history, courses that my research complemented. Moreover, UNF enabled me to augment my offerings through curriculum development opportunities. In 1993 I won an International Studies grant to pull together a course on the British Empire and in 1995 I garnered the first Reilly Fellowship to create a course in Irish history, both offerings now popular items in my regular stable of classes. Needless to say, the knowledge I gained from investigating one topic area informed the other. Along the way, faculty and administrators encouraged my growth as a teacher, enabling me to garner five teaching awards in the past eleven years. I've never had the chance to say thanks for these opportunities, so I do now. And incidentally, if nobody spontaneously recognizes your pedagogical skills, invite a peer to see you in action and, if sufficiently dazzled, to nominate you for Outstanding Teacher.

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My appreciation for nearly two full decades here is no doubt deepened by the personal happiness UNF and the greater Jacksonville community brought me, however inadvertent that may have been on the institution's or the city's part. My dear husband of twelve years, Theo Prousis, is also my colleague. We were hired at the same time by a burgeoning department that thought we might get along. My sons grew to manhood in Jacksonville, served well by the Duval County Public Schools and Stanton High in particular. My c.v. cannot begin to articulate what I'm proudest of: seeing James and Andrew achieve personal and career success. Of course, some of my closest friends are campus-connected, members of the faculty and their spouses. UNF also encouraged me to become an active participant in my community, acknowledging that useful expertise doesn't stop at Alumni Drive. My association with several leadership groups in town genuinely pleases me and provides me with invaluable extramural networks. I am also sincerely grateful for the dynamism and fosterage of some past recipients of this award from my department, the most honored on campus. Several of them specifically encouraged my growth as a teacher-scholar and I thank them for their interest in my career. If you count our former cohorts in Philosophy, now an autonomous department, six of my colleagues have been named Distinguished Professor before me. But I am the first woman in THIS august group to be so honored, making me a kind of pioneer after all.