

Endowed With a Deeper Life – a Brief History of Northland College  
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Northland College was born of a dream and a vision near the end of the Gilded Age. On July 14, 1892, a parade of citizens and civic leaders led by an ecumenical group of clergy marched down Ellis Avenue to a clear-cut above Bay City Creek to lay the cornerstone of the academy building. The dedication ceremony included a speech by Dr. Blaisdell of Beloit College. His prescient invocation declared, “An academy is not built of rock, or of granite, or of sandstone that hardens with exposure. . . but it is not an institution until you have endowed it with a deeper life.” He went on to say, “In laying this cornerstone you are putting into this institution a determination. The destiny of this school is now trembling in the balance.”

Blaisdell’s prose is telling. Founded as the North Wisconsin Academy, the school stood at the northern edge of *the Great Cutover*, the clear-cut scarred region of northern Wisconsin that was described as “a God-forsaken waste extending south 300 miles from Lake Superior.” The region had grown rapidly following the Civil War, with immigrant settlements providing the labor for logging, mining and shipping industries. But schools were scarce and the children of immigrant and native families lacked the opportunities provided by education beyond the eighth grade. The group of Congregational religious leaders and civic visionaries came together found such a school. The founders’ *Declaration of Principles* included a specific charge to provide education for youth “from foreign countries”, and with an open door “to all students of both sexes and of all races.” This was the vision and the dream: to make this corner of the world a better place by offering liberal arts and practical education for all.

The college was seen as a moral cause from its very beginning. That moral cause was extended to consideration of the environment by the second academy president, M. J. Fenenga. A tireless champion of the school and of the region, it was Fenenga who linked the moral cause of education for all persons to education for the sake of healing the cutover land. Fenenga called this, “the impelling power of a great idea.” Fenenga also saw the need for extending education beyond a high school diploma, and under his administration the college was chartered in 1906. He chose the 35<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah as the proper motto for the college because of its prophetic vision of a restored land and a *higher way* through the challenges of life. He also noted that this college was named not after a religious denomination, nor a wealthy patron, but after a place – the north land. The dream and the vision were grounded by this place.

An early history of the college would not be complete without an honest appraisal of its significant challenges. Blaisdell called for a firm dedication precisely because the school’s destiny “hangs in the balance”. The truth is, the

college was grossly underfunded from its very beginning. Supporters and trustees broke ground on the academy building (now Wheeler Hall) having raised barely half of the initial money they thought necessary to begin the effort. The year after breaking ground, and with less than half the pledges returned, the United States plunged into the Panic of 1893. The school survived by the enormous sacrifices of President Wheeler and the staff, plus the extraordinary generosity of a few benefactors and trustees. One observes an almost stubborn grit in the ability of the young school to endure countless economic pressures and wide swings in enrollment from its very beginning and throughout its history. In a 1926 article about Northland College published in the Milwaukee Journal, the newspaper wrote, "At the heart of 10,000,000 acres of cutover land, with understanding of its need and vision of its future, Northland College is growing. . . The pinch of poverty, the honest poverty of a pioneer land willing to pay that price for the fulfillment of an ideal, is hers and will be hers."

So it has been. The college has often followed the larger ebbs and flows of the nation's history, with declining enrollments in times of war and financial challenges during economic crises. Yet the college endures. One can persuasively argue that Northland endures and thrives because of the depth of its moral vision and its dedication to the region and the great lake. The college has turned to its deep commitments time and again for renewal, even as it articulates and refines those ideas with each generation. We see this renewal when the college established a pioneering environmental curriculum in 1971. The tenth college President, Malcolm McLean, led the efforts to create the Environmental Studies programs, the founding of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, and the Native American Studies program, at the same time the college struggled with financial exigency. Again, we witness the crucible of vision and poverty at work in the history of the college.

That period of challenge and renewal is now more than a generation past. So the college begins a new effort to endow the college with a deeper life for a new generation and a new century. Blaisdell's charge at the first dedication still rings a prophetic tone and sets a challenge for our efforts today, that we, "put into this institution a determination. The destiny of this school is now trembling in the balance."

## CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM NORTHLAND'S HISTORY

1. The academy and college was founded to serve the underserved, and to provide opportunities for those without opportunity.
2. The college was founded with a nascent sense of diversity and the necessity of diverse disciplines, views and cultural understanding.

3. The college also recognized a profound sense of place and a commitment to a practical education for the purpose of healing the land as well as developing engaged citizens.

4. The college was consistently mission driven and not donor driven, even in its darkest days. That, I would argue is the irony of Northland –its enduring struggle as well as its marked strength.

5. The college dedicated itself to the liberal arts in both its classical and its evolving form. And, the faculty of the college served the liberal arts mission with extraordinary dedication and even love.

6. Several concluding points on the enduring power of the liberal arts and the environmental mission:

- The problems that bedevil our society and world require the full extent of human understanding if we will develop solutions to issues ranging from global climate change to massive migration and population shifts. What more can we do other than dedicate ourselves to understanding:
- the world we inhabit and our relationship to that world and all its other creatures; what it means to be human; understanding the stories we have told and will tell to help us make sense of our experience; exploring the images, sounds and songs we make that both elevate and deepen our lives;
- this is the heartbeat and life-blood of Northland College – everything else is adiafora and auxiliary.

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Dr. James Blaisdell, Beloit College  
Cornerstone Inauguration Event, Northland College, 1892