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## Distinguished Professor Convocation Address, September 29, 2006

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**Theophilus C. Prousis, Distinguished Professor, Department of History  
Convocation Address, UNF, 29 September 2006**

What a year, with much to celebrate! I got to throw out the first pitch at a UNF baseball game for the second year in a row because of my Distinguished Professor status--runner-up last year, winner this time around--and the ball reached the plate both times, prompting Head Coach Dusty Rhodes to say, "Pretty good, for a lefty." I'm currently enjoying a well-earned full-year sabbatical, and have already seen my initial efforts reach fruition with "Bedlam in Beirut," an article on an 1826 pirate attack in this multi-sectarian Levantine port. The fools, the term of affection for our two boys James and Andrew, have found happiness and success in the Pacific Northwest, landscape of memory for my Seattle-native wife, colleague, and inspiration, Betty Furdell, a past recipient of the Distinguished Professor award. And then there's my niece--if you googled the name Prousis, the majority of listings would tell you about Alexis, senior tennis star at Northwestern, who won the NCAA doubles championship this past spring, earned All-American honors, and played doubles at the US Open a few weeks ago. Last but hardly least, how can a Chicago native not mention the sports highlight of the year, the White Sox winning the World Series, reminding everyone (again) that only one Major League baseball team really plays in the Windy City, and that team plays on the South Side! The White Sox won't be defending their championship this October, but I thank them for a wonderful ride that began during the Eisenhower administration when I first declared my loyalty to them.

So many possible topics crossed my mind when I imagined giving this speech. I kept thinking about the value of my excellent liberal arts education at the University of Minnesota, where I had the opportunity to sample an amazing variety of

history and humanities courses and to read a fascinating array of great works of literature by Kafka and Cavafy, Tolstoy and Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Kazantzakis, Chekhov and Seferis, Pushkin and Palamas, and that loveable eccentric Gogol. Yes, I fell in love with Russian and modern Greek authors, combining my passion for European and Russian history with an appreciation of literature as a rich wellspring for understanding not just history, memory, and identity but the complexity and resiliency of the human spirit. I recall reading *The Possessed (The Devils)*, Dostoevsky's captivating caricature of nineteenth-century Russian radicals and terrorists who fought against the tsarist regime, and I actually felt possessed. Years later when I traveled and did research in Russia it dawned on me that Russian writers, with their edgy characters and indelible images, have been our absolute best guide for deciphering that country's complex realities. I still assign Dostoevsky's psychological thriller in my Imperial Russia class, and students' post-9/11 perspective has sensitized them to Dostoevsky's prophetic insight into the minds and hearts of fanatics. I recall we had to read nearly every Kazantzakis work available in English, including *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, 33, 333 lines of poetry picking up the story where Homer left off: a travel-weary Ulysses returns to Ithaca, becomes bored, and wanders the entire globe in an intellectual pilgrimage through every major philosophical, social, and political movement of the twentieth century until...well, I won't give away where he ends up or what he finds about the meaning of freedom. I'd like to think that most UNF graduates would look back at their education with fond memories of the intellectual excitement they experienced.

Also at Minnesota I benefited from committed teachers and engaging scholars. These outstanding professors inspired me with their love of teaching and

scholarship, and instilled in me the value of foreign language study, another vital component in a quality undergraduate education. I came to Minnesota with some knowledge of French and modern Greek, mostly from my father who, educated on Cyprus and in Lebanon, served as a translator in the US Army, saw action on the beaches of Normandy, and did liaison work with the French underground. He passed down to his family a love of travel, learning, reading, and foreign languages, and enthusiastically supported my study of Russian, although we stopped discussing World War II after heated debates over what really turned the tide in Europe: his D-Day assault, which occurred relatively late in the war, or my Russian front, highlighted by the Battle of Moscow, the dramatic 900-Day Siege of Leningrad, and the German surrender at Stalingrad fifteen months before D-Day.

Anyway, Minnesota reinforced the importance of foreign languages and gave me wonderful opportunities to study and conduct research in Athens, Thessaloniki, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Odessa. I absorbed local life and culture, and spent countless hours digging in various historical and literary archives, collecting resources that became the essential foundation of my scholarship on Russian-Greek relationships, such as Greek merchant activities in the Black Sea region and Russia's long-standing religious ties to Eastern Orthodox communities in the Near East. I would like to see all UNF students take two years of a foreign language, and I don't consider foreign culture courses, as valuable as mine are for exposing students to the Middle East and to Russia, the equivalent of actually learning a language, the indispensable passport to success and survival in today's world. We have all heard sad stories about the US government's historical deficiency in training enough language experts: Russian and Chinese speakers

after World War II; Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and Pushtu specialists today. Foreign languages matter.

My research experiences and language skills enabled me to carve out a unique place in scholarship, exploring contacts and connections between Imperial Russia, the Balkans, and the eastern Mediterranean. By bringing trade, culture, and religion into focus, I have broadened scholarly approaches to the Eastern Question, the nineteenth-century European dilemma of what to do with the so-called “sick man of Europe,” the surprisingly resilient Ottoman Empire, still possessing strategic lands and vital waterways in the Levant. My scholarship has transformed Eastern Question history from a largely one-dimensional military, naval, and diplomatic issue into a multi-faceted and more animated picture. Manuscript and archival sources have given me vivid stories on trade, piracy, rebellion, and foreign intrigue, allowing me to reconstruct social, commercial, cultural, and religious interactions between the various peoples who lived, traveled, and traded in the Levant.

My current project, based on research in London’s National Archives, draws on virtually untapped British consular papers about the state of the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century, an era fraught with internal and external crisis triggered by war, revolt, the breakdown of effective governing institutions, and European intervention. My previous investigation of Russian consular reports, together with my ongoing analysis of British records, offers abundant firsthand testimony on the Ottoman world. By relating specific incidents, episodes, and situations, consular communiqués provide insight into the human dimension of everyday life in Ottoman society during a time of chronic unrest and disorder. Rich in texture and nuance, these documents

resonate with contemporary relevance, describing commercial rivalry, sectarian tension, smuggling, local warlords, plundered antiquities, collective reprisal, outside interference, and the ambiguity of borders and frontiers in these embattled lands. All these advantages explain my fascination with British and Russian consular sources, and the publication of my next book and articles will contribute to eastern Mediterranean maritime history.

Scholarship encompasses research, work in progress, and conference papers, but the essential component remains publication. Most faculty claim work in progress and research agendas, but only those who publish on a regular basis can attain distinction as teacher-scholars. I've been asked my entire professional life, by family and friends alike, why I devote so much time to research and publication, and my reply always includes some version of what I call the existential imperative, the term I use for our professional obligation to research and to publish. Scholarship with publication validates our standing in the profession, and defines our identity as teacher-scholars. It's safe to say that virtually all faculty and administrators went to graduate school to teach and to write (or to compose, paint, sculpt, film, perform, whatever the case might be in a particular field). Teaching and scholarship constitute the bedrock of the university, and publication brings honor and distinction to the institution.

Scholarship invariably enhances and enriches teaching in many ways. Honing our own analytical and writing skills makes us more effective working with students, and gives us more authenticity and integrity in the classroom. Conducting research and publishing our work keeps us fresh, energized, and engaged. The excitement and discovery of original research--in my case the exhilaration of coming across neglected documents--translates into more creative, innovative teaching. In my

classes, and in my publications, I interpret sources in their multiple contexts--social, political, cultural, literary, biographical. In my classes, and in my publications, I deal with issues of cultural and religious interaction in multi-cultural societies, national identity in multi-ethnic settings, the politics of religion and trade, and transnational relationships between European and non-European lands. These topics spark my intellectual curiosity, generate new perspectives for my students, and inform my scholarship. And no matter what we research or where it takes us, from St. Augustine to Seattle, from China to Europe, just think of the treasure trove of anecdotes, situations, and resources we can share with our students.

The prospect of teaching my cross-regional areas of interest drew my attention to UNF when I entered the job market. With much-appreciated departmental support and encouragement, I designed courses--at all levels of instruction--in European, Russian, Balkan, Holocaust, and Middle Eastern history. These classes integrate multi-cultural perspectives and interdisciplinary methods, and benefit from frequent upgrades creating more engaging and sophisticated experiences. My courses challenge and transform student learning, which explains why students routinely evaluate my Holocaust course as powerful and life-changing. To their surprise they discover that Holocaust history features lively debate, legitimate disagreement, and revisionist views, excluding the obvious bigotry and racism of Holocaust denial. Students examine the “Holocaust mosaic” of Jewish and non-Jewish loss, come away understanding the uniqueness of the Jewish victims, and apply Holocaust history to the killing fields of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur. Students in my classes on Russia respond well to primary source readings, such as Akhmatova’s poetry on the Stalin Terror, women’s diaries on the Leningrad Siege, and

last year's new favorite, Bulgakov's masterpiece novella from the 1920s, *The Heart of a Dog*. I'm partial to Bulgakov, since we had to struggle through his prose in fourth-year Russian at Minnesota, but I had forgotten the pure fun and contemporary resonance of this particular text. A sweet dog gets a human brain and sex gland transplant, then turns into a vile, vulgar lout who drinks too much, reads and misinterprets Engels, gets a job catching stray cats in Moscow, and threatens his physician owner with the secret police. A hilarious blend of science fiction, satire, and social commentary, Bulgakov's gem prompts students to wrestle with the parallels between scientific experiments and Bolshevik social engineering, and evokes the unintended consequences of Russia's multiple transformations, including fallout from Gorbachev's rocking the Bloc.

Each of us teaches to our individual strengths, inspired by our individual talents, and it's this incredible diversity and individuality that our teaching reflects. It would be a shame to lose the uniqueness of our faculty in a swamp of sameness and corporate identity under the guise of outcomes assessments and similar foolery; these administrative fads have been foisted upon faculty, wasting precious faculty time, demeaning faculty creativity, and marginalizing faculty expertise in crafting course objectives and evaluating student performance. Trusting faculty to do our job also entails giving departments real autonomy and more authority to design faculty schedules that meet student and curricular needs and reward productive scholars with an occasional course release. Since scholarship stimulates exemplary teaching and service, it's scholarship that enables faculty to become distinguished. It's my hope that UNF will not only support faculty scholars with sufficient resources but feature scholarship as the critical marker of faculty success and institutional recognition.



I fully thank faculty and administrators for their generous support of my work over the years. With travel monies, sabbaticals, a summer research grant, and unstinting Inter-Library Loan service, I've forged a successful academic career. I've been incredibly fortunate to belong to an extraordinary department that has always nurtured and promoted faculty development, and I thank my chairs and teacher-scholar mentors for all their assistance. While mindful of the remarkable accomplishments of faculty in other departments and colleges across the university, I believe our department represents the model of sustained excellence. Our student evaluations consistently surpass college and university averages. We've received teaching and scholarship awards, national and international grants, and other honors, and we've assumed leadership positions in the profession, the university, and the community. Our publication records match the productivity of professors at larger, more research-oriented state universities in Florida and elsewhere. Maybe the best measure of distinction is that every single full professor has won the Distinguished Professor award, giving our department more than any other. We may be aging, but get ready for a fresh crop of distinguished historians, busy compiling their own records as exemplary teacher-scholars: Francis, Kaplan, Sheehan-Dean, Rothschild, Closmann, and our most recent hire, Sheffler. And we're a congenial and cooperative group, notwithstanding a few bumps, bruises, and rogues along the way. On a personal note, I thank the department for having the good sense to hire my future wife and me in the same year. They thought we might get along, and the rest is history.