You usually hear me speak about policy issues for higher education, California, and the CSU, and most recently these past months, the “B word”—budget—has dominated our thinking and planning and even our subconscious.

I have tried when talking about the budget to recognize that the budget is more than just dollars—numbers—and to recognize that the budget affects the human dimension of all who work here. I am ever mindful of the deleterious consequences of the furloughs on people’s personal financial circumstances, the disruption to professional satisfaction because of the furloughs, and the erosion of spirit and confidence that is the consequence of dealing with the ambiguity about the future that has been introduced into our world.

I will, at the end of this speech, offer you the briefest of glimpses into the Governor’s budget recommendations for the CSU, but in truth we don’t know much yet about those recommendations since they were just released last Friday. But it should be clear from the title of my speech that I want to address something other than the budget today.

This is not the kind of speech I usually give—this one is from the heart and from the head about how I see my hopes for our academic community.

Today I want to speak to the importance of nurturing our professional selves and our academic and scholarly community through dialogue. My unvarnished purpose is to plead for the use and centrality of dialogue as a way of keeping the faith and keeping the focus through these uncertain times.

I will begin with a description of a strong, competing approach to handling differences and difficulties that, unfortunately, seems to be becoming normative in our society and culture. Second, I am going to offer a definitional framework for understanding what I mean by dialogue. Third, I will move on to set the stage—intellectually and practically—for how dialogue can work in our community, by offering what I consider to be axioms for life in the academic community.
Finally, I will conclude with some suggestions for how we can sustain dialogue within our community at Cal State Northridge both by what we do and what we should not do.

Let me acknowledge the intellectual traditions from which my ideas stem. While there are numerous scholars who contribute to the understanding of dialogue—Martin Buber, Paolo Freire, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and others—I want to especially acknowledge two books that have been very influential for me—both by a former faculty member and department chair here, Donald Hall. In some ways, I could put a huge footnote on this entire speech to give proper credit for ideas, inspiration and sometime specific words to Donald Hall in his books, The Academic Self: An Owner’s Manual and The Academic Community: A Manual for Change. The theses of Donald’s books are that the academic self and the academic community are sustained through dialogue.

I offer the centrality and efficacy of dialogue as the counter to what I see and fear is becoming normative for how individuals and groups within our society reveal, interrogate, acknowledge, and react to differences of opinion.

We live in a world in which a stock television talk show includes the expectation that invited guests to the show will shout at each other, not listening and not responding to anything specific that is offered; where there are people who work for the television show who are hired to intercede when these guests physically go after each other.

We live in a society that tolerates, and yes, even applauds a Congressman who yells at the President of the United States in a speech to Congress, “You lie.” We live in a society where the norms of communication are increasingly set by radio talk show hosts who offer dogmatic, evaluative statements, judgments about others, often without proof and often without what we in the academy would consider to be evidence or reasoned logic.

It is acceptable now for protestors to show their opposition to student fee increases by physically threatening a university chancellor in his home. It is now apparently acceptable for those opposed to a university president and his actions within the CSU to send him threatening letters including racial slurs. In our own community, we have, unfortunately, had speakers who came here to speak to audiences and were shouted down or not allowed to speak because of opposing viewpoints.

I am frankly unnerved and saddened by this evolving set of norms for how we deal with differences and disagreements. Instead, I ask all of you as members of the Cal State Northridge community to emphasize and strengthen our use of dialogue to sustain us through these difficult times—both your individual (or academic) selves and as an academic community.

What do I mean when I call upon us to utilize dialogue? A simple “dictionary definition” of dialogue for everyday use is “a conversational exchange between two or more people.”

A more contemporary and richer lay definition of dialogue that I found on the web differentiates mere communication from dialogue because, “Dialogue is shared exploration towards greater understanding, connection, or possibility” (http://www.co-intelligence.org/). It is this emphasis on dialogue for achieving greater understanding and connection that I want to highlight.
Within the 20th century scholarly world, a number of cultural critics emphasized the importance of dialogue as a way for humans to respond to industrialization. A writer, influential to me in my earlier years, was Martin Buber, whose book, *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*, 1923) articulated a philosophy of personal dialogue that Buber described as defining the nature of personal reality. Buber saw dialogue as necessary within the self and with others, along, of course, because he was a theologian, with God. Buber was important to my intellectual and professional maturation, since his work inspired me to understand that my own personal reality was in large measure subject to my own control and definition. Blaming others, people or systems, became less useful for me personally.

Donald Hall, in the two books I mentioned, *The Academic Self* and *The Academic Community*, draws inspiration for how he sees dialogue in the life of an academic self and in the academic community from Hans-Georg Gadamer because of Gadamer’s core belief in dialogue as the way by which we, “gain knowledge of ourselves, our limitations, and our necessary ties of respect and responsibility to others in our social and professional lives” (*The Academic Community*, p. 8).

I’d like now to offer some axioms—one could call them truths, to me they are truths—which lay the foundation for my plea for the centrality of dialogue in what are uncertain times (especially uncertain budgetary times) in this University and generally in higher education.

1. I believe what brought most of us to the academy in the first place is our love of ideas, and the sheer exhilaration from the sharing of those ideas with others and the intellectual expansiveness that results from having our ideas challenged. Along with this is the transformative power of sharing knowledge and ideas, not only with colleagues but with students in the teaching and learning process.

2. Most of us probably also joined the academy accepting the admonition of Socrates that, “the unexamined life is not worth living,” and therefore, we benefit from reflecting on our own actions, thoughts and responsibilities.

3. Our professional lives are not lived in isolation. We are part of a department, a college, a university, a community, a system. (See Hall, *The Academic Community*, page 6.)

4. One reason we value communities is because communities sustain people though difficult times, but to create this sustaining quality requires effort and intentionality by individuals.

5. In Donald Hall’s words, “the individual [is] the agent of change,” within his or her own life, and then moves from individual concerns to coalition building and conversational processes to effect change in the community. (See Hall, *The Academic Community*, page 7.) As noted by Hall—and this is a direct quote (*The Academic Community*, p. 39), “We may not be the ‘author’ or our own lives, but we make choices every day in ways that contribute to the text of those lives. We can choose openness.” In other words, we can choose to engage in dialogue as a way to achieve
and ensure greater understanding, connection, and possibility.

6. Healthy communities do not depend on consensus. And again in Hall’s words, “Community is a conversational process, a ‘becoming’ that is never fully achieved….” (See Hall, The Academic Community, p. 89.)

7. These axioms become more important in times of budgetary crisis and cuts.

Again quoting directly from Donald Hall in The Academic Community (p. 100): “Only by continuing to speak to each other can we strategize so that we can retain some measure of agency in defining ourselves and our institutional identities and not feel ourselves to be at the mercy of others who may define us in ways that we find unacceptable or demoralizing. This is an absolute necessity when we are hit with budget cuts and other threats to our financial security and integrity.”

In other words, it is during the difficult and uncertain times that we need dialogue the most.

As stated so eloquently by Donald, “The key here, as it is has been throughout …, is dialogue. If we do not talk to each other, often and at length, about our differing perspectives and insights, our loves, needs, and priorities, we may lead a life that is ‘academic’ in the pejorative sense….” (See Hall, The Academic Community, p. 144.)

So what exactly am I suggesting we do? And what should we avoid? I would now like to suggest some more concrete suggestions to help us here at Cal State Northridge to sustain dialogue.

1. First, I would like to suggest that we accept that we as individuals can and must become agents of change within ourselves, within our University, and within its parts.

2. Second, we can accept the reality that change is almost always incremental, not instantaneous.

3. Third, we can nurture our own internal dialogue. This includes taking the time to ponder the types of questions that attracted us to the academic community in the first place and that arise because of our continued academic development.

4. Fourth, we can provide substance or “food” for this internal dialogue through regular efforts to feed our academic souls, through reading, through participating in brown bag discussions and other events in our departments and colleges where colleagues present their work or work-in-progress to one another and discuss it, by participating in retreats such as this one, and by taking the time to think about what we learn from others through reading and discussions.

5. We can seek out opportunities to submit our work and share our ideas for the consideration of others, through writing and discussions as mentioned above, thereby initiating and contributing to the dialogue.
6. We can each practice listening to others, rather than jumping to conclusions before we have asked, sought out information, and listened.

7. We can avoid monopolizing the conversation. We can make sure everyone has a chance to speak and be heard.

8. We can be sure of the facts before we espouse them to others.

9. We can say what is true for us, without making each other wrong.

10. We can avoid *ad hominem* attacks—we can avoid attacks or arguments that link the validity of another’s point of view to an irrelevant characteristic or belief about the persons advocating that point of view.

11. We can accept that there will *invariably* be opposing points of view.

12. We can have our conversations face to face. And as a corollary, we can be wary of extended email exchanges, which too easily lead to misunderstanding and distortion.

13. We can communicate with transparency—an overused term, but an important value.

In many ways, I am speaking to the choir. You are all here because you are nurturing yourself and your community.

We in the Cal State Northridge community have *done well* in sustaining dialogue through these uncertain and difficult times. Our Faculty Senate and its leadership are models of dialogue with one another, with their faculty colleagues, and with those of us in administrative positions.

From the perspective of the University-wide leadership, we share the commitment to dialogue and try to hold ourselves to the highest standards of dialogue as we believe it is our responsibility to lead by modeling what we hope to receive from and see in others. As president, I have emphasized the importance of this with those whom I work most directly. We hope we respond with dialogue even when challenged by tactics that come from that increasingly normative set of communication practices that are perhaps communication, but not dialogue.

I ask you to preserve and protect yourself as a valuable member of the University, and to work to nurture dialogue and to sustain our University community.

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