

**From Good to Great:  
Be Fearless, Selfless, Ambitious. Believe**

**SMLR 2011 Convocation Address  
Dean David Finegold**

Management guru Jim Collins has devoted his career to studying what enables organizations to go “From Good to Great.” In his latest book, *How the Mighty Fall*, he analyzes why some once great companies failed, while others faced major challenges and recovered. He concludes:

“The signature of the truly great versus the merely successful is not the absence of difficulty, but the ability to come back from setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes, stronger than before.”

This is true for great nations, great companies, great social institutions, and great individuals.

The last year has demonstrated the truth of these words for SMLR like never before. It began with a major financial challenge: after a mid-year budget cut, the state announced that it was slashing funding for public higher education by 15%. These cuts were passed down to the different units, including SMLR, and fell heavily on faculty and staff.

In this environment, it would have been easy for individuals to have become demoralized. To lose the momentum that we’ve been building to be recognized as the world’s leading source of expertise on work, people, organizations and the changing employment relationship.

But SMLR did not capitulate; instead it responded with one of the most successful years in the School’s history. SMLR’s growth in programs has more than offset the loss in state support. Indeed, next Fall, when our proposed HR Major is up and running, we may even have to look for a new Convocation venue to make room for all of our graduates and their families and friends. And what I’m most proud of is that, despite this growth, you, our students, consistently report that your #1 reason for choosing SMLR is the great quality of our faculty and the chance to get to know them one-on-one.

Last Fall SMLR and the Rutgers community were stunned by a very different, more personal blow. On a cool October day, along with thousands of fans in the Meadowlands Stadium, I looked on in horrified silence as one of our own students, Eric LeGrand, lay unmoving on the field following a jarring hit on a kickoff return. Eric was rushed to emergency surgery and the prognosis was bleak: he was paralyzed and the doctors warned his family that he might never breathe on his own or regain the use of his arms and legs. It would have been easy for this popular athlete and SMLR student to give up hope and give in to anger after this terrible injury. But that is not Eric. With constant support from his teammates, family, and friends, he pursued a simple but powerful motto: “Believe.”

He was determined that he would not rely on a ventilator – and now he is out of hospital and breathing on his own. He works hard each day in rehabilitation, and is gradually regaining the

use of his hands. He has just completed a class and next Fall he is planning to take a full course load. I look forward someday soon to presenting him with his diploma, and hope we can all be there to see him achieve his ultimate goal: to walk back out into Rutgers Stadium surrounded by a sea of scarlet supporters. Throughout his painfully slow but steady recovery, his determination, his courage, and, most of all, his positive spirit have inspired the Scarlet Knight family around the world.

This Spring we were faced with another tragedy: one of our brightest young stars, Pamela Sue Schmidt, was killed. Pam was a part of all of the degree programs here today: a Labor Studies Major and an HR Minor who was thrilled to have just been admitted into our MHRM program. She was someone who left each person she touched a little better: finding scholarships to help friends, supporting her teammates as they readied to take part in their first-ever HR case competition, and always making time to connect with family.

Faced with this senseless killing, her family, friends, faculty, and fellow students could have let grief consume and separate them; instead, they have come together to find ways to remember and act on all of the positive things that Pam stood for to benefit generations of students to come. As one small part of this effort, her friends have created this bracelet, embossed with 3 words that capture Pam's character: "Fearless. Selfless. Ambitious."

These are qualities that our School will need in the days ahead as we face what will perhaps be SMLR's greatest challenge as an institution. Nearly 65 years ago, the Institute and a handful of schools like it around the country were founded "to promote harmony and cooperation between management and labor, and greater understanding of industrial and labor relations, thereby to enhance the unity and welfare of the people of the state."

Today we live in a very different reality. Professors in our field are under attack in Wisconsin and Michigan. And fundamental questions are being raised about the future of unions, and the rights of individuals to organize and bargain collectively. About whether millions of low-wage female workers and consumers have the right to file class action suits against some of the US's largest employers?

How should we respond? Again, Jim Collins suggests an answer. What distinguishes great organizations from the merely good, the ones that are "Built to Last" not "built to fail," is that they exist for a higher purpose. In SMLR's case, I'd argue that this purpose is nothing short of restoring the American Dream: that our children will inherit a world better than our own.

The key to turning this dream into a reality is innovation and creating enough high-quality jobs for American workers. We are still recovering from the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Close to 14 million Americans are unemployed, millions more than work in all of US manufacturing, and almost 6 million of these have been out of work for 6 months or more. And although we have begun to see a growth in new jobs, the best estimates are that it will be 2018 at the earliest before the unemployment rate is back down to its pre-recession level, and many of us fear that even this is too optimistic. Last year, New Jersey ranked 50<sup>th</sup>, dead last, in job creation in the US, one of only 4 states to have lost jobs during this so-called recovery.

No other institution is better placed than SMLR to bring together management and labor, policymakers and other stakeholders with the world's leading group of experts on workforce issues to come up with creative solutions to the pressing economic and social problems facing our state.

How do we achieve such a lofty goal? Let me give you some very concrete examples:

- By demonstrating the bottom line returns to both employers and employees of building inclusive organizations, absolutely vital in the Garden State, which, along with California, has the world's most diverse workforce;
- By showing that there can be an alternative model of education reform, where teachers and their unions are not the villains, but partners with management in creating more effective schools and improving outcomes for students;
- By conducting research which shows that organizations which give their employees a stake in the success of the enterprise and a voice in how it is run outperform their peers, and building a new, interactive map on the web that will highlight these employee-owned companies across the country;
- By working with stakeholders to put together the evidence that led NJ to become one of only two states to provide its workers with Paid Family Leave, a right that workers in all of the US's main competitors take for granted;
- By creating a new global research community and website – GreenHRM.org -- which brings together experts on HR and environment to help build sustainable organizations;
- By doing the pioneering work on new kinds of organizations that can effectively organize and represent the rights of low-wage, immigrant workers;
- By coming together, as we did last Saturday at Rutgers Day, to pack more than 40,000 meals to feed hungry children and their families around the world;
- And tomorrow, by kicking off the 3<sup>rd</sup> session of our Mini MBA in Global BioEntrepreneurship that will bring together 7 life-science start-up companies from around the world that are eager to invest in operations in NJ, and matching them with 14 displaced professionals who together have over 200 years of experience in the biopharma industry to create new jobs here in NJ.

The list could go on and on, but I've got a feeling you'd like me to wind up and get on to the main business of the evening.

As you, our newest graduates, enter this difficult labor market, I urge you to apply all that you have learned to come up with your own creative solutions to improving the world in which we live and work. Follow the advice of our President who noted that the success of our nation has been built on the "risk takers, the doers, the makers of things – some celebrated, but more often men and women obscure in their labor – who have carried us up the long, rugged path toward prosperity and freedom."

As you chart your own career path I urge you to:

- *Find your passion* – so that work isn't just a pay check, but a calling;

- *Stay connected* – with each other and with your School, so we can celebrate your achievements and share them with a new generation of students;
- *Be an ambassador* – spreading the word about all the great things that are happening at SMLR and Rutgers; and
- *Give back* – whether it is buying a bracelet, creating a scholarship, or mentoring a future leader.

Most of all, as each one of you, the members of the Class of 2011, prepare to leave the banks of the Raritan to start the next chapter in your lives as part of more than 390,000 living Rutgers alumni, I commend you to follow the advice of Pam and Eric:

- Be fearless in the face of adversity;
- Be selfless leaders, who help the less fortunate cope with these challenging times;
- Be ambitious to redefine and restore the American Dream.
- And believe that you can and will make a difference.

Congratulations! I know that you will make us proud.

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It is my honor to announce the creation of a new student award for Outstanding Service to the Community. The Pamela Sue Schmidt Award will be given annually to the SMLR undergraduate who has had the most positive impact on the community either within the School, across Rutgers, or outside the University. Winners of the award will be given a scholarship to continue their studies at SMLR. I'm delighted that with the School's one-to-one match, we have already raised \$40,000 toward our goal of creating a permanent endowment to honor Pam.