Thank you, Mike and Monica and thanks to the leadership of the Associated Students of WSUV and the Office of Student Involvement for sponsoring this event today. I have great faith in this generation of students—your generation—and I am honored to have been selected to give the keynote address at this Expanding Leadership Conference.

I want to start with a story. It happened in the late 1980s, and it was told to me by an English colleague at the time. She had recently been having lunch in our school cafeteria and was observing a conversation among a group of students. The conversation had a tone of anti-Semitism to it as one young man complained about various privileges—like extra holidays—obtained by being Jewish. The conversation ended and the students departed. Another young man who had participated in the conversation realized the inappropriateness of it and returned to the table. Just by happenstance they’d been sharing their table with a woman student. So, the guy returned to the table and apologized for his friend.
“I hope we didn’t make you uncomfortable,” he said. She responded, “That’s okay, I’m not Jewish.”

I tell you this story, because there is probably no other teachable moment in my life that has influenced me more as a leader than this one. I don’t know that I remember the details correctly, or exactly when it happened, or even if my colleague had the story exactly correct. But the feeling of sadness and shame that I felt in that moment is just as fresh today as it was then. I think about that moment and I ask, “Could that have been me?” And whenever I ignore an injustice that occurs to someone else, this refrain of “That’s okay, I’m not Jewish” gives me a knot in my stomach.

At the time, I was a 20-something professor of communication in Buffalo. While I was not in a formal position of leadership, I had had many formal experiences as a leader: Key Club VP and Academic Olympics team captain in high school, chief engineer and news director of our TV station in college, president of the graduate student association in Utah. And I have certainly had many since, including the one that got me here today. Yet, it is this moment from 20-plus years ago, which I only learned of secondhand that stays with me so vividly and comes back to me so often.
Why is that and what does it have to do with leadership anyway? For me, that moment stands in for those times that I have remained on the sidelines when action was required. Whether I am Jewish or not, I should be offended by someone’s anti-Semitism and I should not sit quietly by and excuse it because I’m not Jewish, right? Insert other religions, or racism or anti-gay comments or jokes about people with physical challenges. I would venture that practically everyone in this room can remember a “That’s okay, I’m not Jewish” moment in their lives. I know I can.

But I have to admit, hearing of this moment, told by someone who was removed from the conversation to someone who wasn’t even there had a greater impact than any of those moments I had experienced firsthand. I think that the ability to take an objective look, free from the anxiety, shame and impotence that we personally feel as witnesses to these moments gave me perspective.

As leaders, those moments where we are called to act courageously are rarely the ones that happen in formal settings. And yet, how we act—what we do—in those informal settings will speak volumes about the leaders we will be in the official positions that we aspire to.
It can be nothing short of terrifying to speak out when a situation begs for an emergent leader. And that is when we need to step up. I was watching *We Bought a Zoo* the other night, and Matt Damon tells his son it only takes 20 seconds of courage—total humiliating courage—to change your life. Those 20 seconds of courage is how we change the world, too.

Many of you are here today because you want to actively pursue formal leadership opportunities—to be student council president, a member of ASWSUV, president of a campus club or organization. Many of you have already achieved those distinctions and are looking forward to a life in which even bigger opportunities are open to you. I can tell you the opportunities I have had in my life to serve in leadership roles have been among the most rewarding and fulfilling experiences I have had. So, I am certainly here to encourage you in those pursuits.

But I am also here to caution you. Being in a formal leadership position is a heady experience. And it definitely strokes your ego. It is absolutely the coolest thing that people want to meet me because I am the chancellor of WSU Vancouver. Being in this role has opened doors for me I never expected to walk through. Almost every formal leadership role comes with some kind of an ego
boost. And that is certainly true in my own experiences.

In February 2008, when I was Provost at Keene State, our president happened to be out of town when Barack Obama came to campus. I got to spend some time with him and then share the stage and introduce him. He said, “Mel, call me Barack.” And I still do. In elementary school, I was the lead patrol boy at our school crossing in Louisiana, and I got to travel throughout Texas with the lead patrollers at other schools. When I was dean I was selected to travel to the United Arab Emirates to help design a new communication school in Al Ain. Even being asked to give this speech is pretty amazing. Yes, there are some amazing perks of leadership.

I could talk for hours about the incredible experiences I have had because of the formal leadership roles I have held. And they have been truly meaningful.

But the responsibilities of leadership are huge. You don’t do it for the ego strokes or the perks. And when I talk about responsibilities of leadership, I don’t necessarily mean those grand responsibilities, like being responsible for the education of 3,000 women and men or 350 acres of buildings and property. Those aren’t the things
that keep me awake. It is the small, human moments that test our mettle as leaders: attending the funeral of a staff member or speaking with the family of a student who died prematurely, connecting with a visitor whose response to getting a parking ticket is so emotional and over the top there’s not a way to console him, helping a student who is struggling.

The thing is, leaders lead people, not things. You can move boxes, some say you can even move mountains. But you can’t lead them. Our successful leaders understand that. As much as we might care about the fiscal cliff or foreign policy, we vote for leaders who relate to us. Because if they understand us and empathize with us, then we have faith that they can get us through difficult situations. And we want to join them on that journey.

Even as a chosen leader, as department chair, dean, provost, and now chancellor, those human moments that arise often have the most meaning, and they definitely define me as a leader. I think of myself as a leader among leaders, for there are many on this campus and in my life. And one of the best things any leader can do is to help others find their voices. That can be difficult when those voices rise up against you, but in all honesty we are better for it.
One of the goals of this conference today is to come to an understanding of the role of leadership in creating a better society—what the literature refers to as the social change model of leadership. Social change is what happens when we, as leaders, help others to become leaders...to find their voices.

I have had the opportunity to meet people who have brought about incredible and important social change in our world: Gloria Steinem, Sr. Helen Prejean, Greg Mortenson, Larry Kramer, my parents. You may not know all of these individuals. You may not know any of them. But each of them has effected positive social change in our world. None of them has ever been elected to public office. Their lives as leaders have been dedicated to making this world a better place for women, for the poor, for the disenfranchised, for all of us. They have been successful because they have helped others bring out the leaders within themselves. That is certainly true for me, and there are probably others in your life who have done the same for you. We can all aspire to the same. Our greatest leaders do.

I said right at the start of my remarks that I have great faith in this generation of student—your generation. I’d like to end there, too. I talk about this a lot, because I believe it so strongly. There is a
tendency, I think, to dismiss our younger generations because they are connected to their technology rather than other human beings. To be honest, I get a little worried when I hear from someone that they met, dated and broke up with a boyfriend or girlfriend—all on Facebook. As a nation we have to take seriously the fact that facility with writing and mathematics has declined among your generation. We—especially those of us in education—owe it to you to hold you to higher standards. I get the concern.

But this is a new world and I am also pretty happy that it is going to be left in your hands. There is no living generation that cares as much about our environment. There is no generation that can use technology to achieve the most extraordinary of things. And, in my view, it is our teens and young adults who have demonstrated recently that they care about others. Volunteerism among our youth is very high. When students come to a college campus they expect to have opportunities to serve their community.

Earlier this week I visited the Center for Civic Engagement at WSU in Pullman. There was such energy in the center that I was taken aback. Every space was filled with students working on volunteer projects, with student wanting to lead alternative spring break trips, with students
wanting a co-curricular service experience to complement classes they were taking. The place was just buzzing.

When I was provost I was at an admissions fair, where any department could put up a table. As you would expect, the admissions and financial aid tables had lots of students. Things like career development and IT, not so much. But the table that had the most students was the one sponsored by the community service office. How can you not have faith in our future when there is such a commitment to service among our youth? You expect it and you demand it, and that is a wonderful thing.

As emergent leaders, you have the opportunity to corral that energy into something magnificent. You have the opportunity to create a better world. You have the opportunity to help others of your generation to find their voices and then to work with them to achieve great, important things. And, finally, you get to be those leaders who don’t stand on the sidelines—who find their 20 seconds of courage to say—“that’s not okay” when they witness injustice.

I want to thank you for participating in this conference today, and for your understanding that leadership is not an end in itself. It is a means to
an end. It’s making a commitment to lead your peers in making this a better campus, a better community and a better world.

Thanks.