

**President Edward S. Inch**  
**Boldly Forward**  
**Convocation Address**  
**August 15, 2022**

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the introduction, Dwayne, and thank you all for joining us this morning. Emma, thank you for sharing your goals and vision as student body president.

For me, this is a special event. It marks the beginning of a new school year, and it is an opportunity for me to address our community. Even more importantly, though, at Convocation, we come together to reflect, celebrate, and set our focus for the new year.

It is hard not to feel the energy building over the past week and today. Our campus looks wonderful, our students have begun to move into residence halls, people are excited for classes to start, and we are ready for the year. Hearing the MavMachine this morning reminds me of the energy our students working with our faculty and staff bring to our campus. The opportunities ahead of us are exciting and, building on our achievements last year and the years before, I am tremendously optimistic about our future.

Last year, learning about our campus, community, culture, and history, reinforced my deep appreciation for the people who worked hard to build and strengthen our university. Our memorial event in June celebrating President Margaret Preska certainly brought this into focus as did recognizing the contributions of Florence Cobb, the founder of our dance program, by naming our dance studio after her. Throughout our history and today, we are fortunate to have had so many talented and dedicated people who lead, shape, and advance our university to sharpen our focus on our students' success.

That is why hiring and retaining great people is so important; they become part of our community and the future direction of our university. I want to welcome our new faculty, staff, and administrators joining our community this year. In my first year, I found this to be a place full of talent and passion. I am proud to call this University my home, and I hope you will find it as inviting, inspiring, and energetic as I have.

Before proceeding, I want to recognize a special guest in our audience. Representative Susan Akland is joining us today. Thank you, Representative Akland, for being here. I look forward to continuing the conversations around how our state supports students and higher education, especially those in the Minnesota State system and here at Minnesota State Mankato.

By almost any measure, last year was a success. We made it through what I hope was the worst of the COVID pandemic. We are not done with it, but we are better, and our successes through the pandemic represent the efforts of our entire community. Thank you.

Our faculty and staff worked tirelessly to ensure students were educated, supported, and successful even under the very worst circumstances. I was and remain genuinely impressed with the passion shown to provide our students with the care they need using all the new and novel tools we developed as teaching and learning conditions changed and challenged us.

This last year, I had many opportunities to meet and learn from people in our region, as well as those who have built our University. I met with every academic and non-academic unit on our campus; I talked with regional leaders and elected officials; and I spoke with the presidents in our system and colleagues in our system office. We deployed the “Communities” online tool for people to offer feedback, insights, and give advice. People were not shy, and we had many, many robust conversations. From those, I took away four primary themes:

- First, our communities are proud of and impressed with the work we do and the students we graduate. There is no question that our students excel along their paths whether it be in their careers, civic engagement, or community leadership. I have talked with alumni who tell me they look to us first for recruiting new talent into their organizations. I have spoken with business leaders who recruit our students because “they know how to get the job done.” Our degrees have value, not only for students but for those who employ them. I met with an alum who owns a factory, and he introduced me to 25 people he hired right out of our university into management positions. He said, and I believe, we graduate exceptional students.
- Second, I regularly hear about the excellent work our university does in our community and state. From our athletes who take time for the youth of our community to skate or swim with the Mavericks to our wrestler who volunteers time with North Mankato schools and everything in between, it is truly remarkable.

Our interdisciplinary Earth Systems Laboratory that officially opened last year is a wonderful example of how faculty collaborate with one another and students to research and better understand natural, observable phenomena and their impact on our world and civilization. Particularly powerful for me was how this lab and our students and faculty supported and worked closely with our tribal communities. It is impossible to walk out of that space and not feel a tremendous appreciation for the work we do. And this is not an isolated example. I marvel so much at the impact we make in the iron range, automotive engineering, performance, artistic expression, and so much more.

I would be remiss, though, if I did not highlight the work and contributions of Dr. Gwen Westerman, the poet Laureate for the State of Minnesota, who works passionately to inspire young writers and thinkers. I was so impressed and grateful to be in attendance when Governor Waltz announced her appointment. Our university makes a difference.

I cannot name all the incredible examples of Mavericks’ impact on our community or in the

world. There are many, and I see our work almost anywhere I go, including MSU night at a Twins game where more than 1200 of us managed through exceptionally high temperatures. It is remarkable and humbling to see and hear so much about the excellent work of our university.

- Third, our campus community is passionate about the success of our students. We cheer for them while they are here and encourage them long past graduation. Over and over, I hear how much our faculty and staff cherish their relationships with students and over and over I hear how much our students cherish their relationships with our faculty and staff.

Many of our alumni tell stories of how a staff or faculty member at the right moment in time offered the right piece of advice, or a nudge, or prompt that gave them a focus, a direction, an inspiration that shaped their life trajectory. It's funny how sometimes the simplest thing to you and me might profoundly and positively help someone. That is why when I have been asked whether the plan is for us to become an online university, I tell them "No." Something about this place and our community is extraordinary and makes a difference for our students and region. Online learning is a valuable tool. We should use it. It will help us in many ways. But it does not substitute for the connections we create or how we deliver the best instruction possible.

- Fourth, I also heard of the downside to our care and passion for our students. Our employees have adapted and adjusted to meet new needs and challenges to support student success by adding programs, centers, processes, and services. That adaptability is necessary and commendable; however, we have done so with flat resources and more often than not we have added these into already full portfolios, stretching many of us pretty thin. This is not a long-term strategy for our success and I'm not even sure it is a reasonable short-term strategy. This year, better aligning our resources to our institutional goals is a necessary priority. If we don't, we become less effective and even more stressed.

Last year, I talked about writing the next chapter in our history, "Chapter 7: The Destination." And I discussed the overarching strategic framework: Destination 2030. Destination 2030 asks two guiding questions: What makes our campus a first-choice destination for learners? And second, what is the University, the Destination, we aspire to be?

To answer those two questions, I focused on five imperatives higher education faces. I used these themes to frame conversations and imagine where we should be headed. Last year was a year to learn, research, and understand. This will be a year where we put the plan to paper—digital paper, and create our institutional roadmap that addresses these questions.

I want to take a few minutes to update you on where we are and what we are planning.

- **Imperative 1: Serving Students and Managing Enrollment.** Our curriculum and academic opportunities are robust and attract many learners to study with us. And, overall, we are doing well and are on track to have an incoming class 10% larger than last year. That is very good. Still, our overall enrollment is down about 3%. Our transfer and graduate enrollment have slipped significantly, and our retention rates remain at low pandemic levels.

This tells us we have work to do. The pandemic and separation from one another did not help, especially when building solid and meaningful relationships is at the core of our work and success. This year, we will deploy new advising and support tools that embed predictive analytics to help with constructive interventions and proactive outreach. At our campus retreat last week, student panelists talked explicitly about how proactive and faculty forward outreach made a difference for them and how it helped retain them to graduation. The new tools we are implementing this year will make a difference.

Further, we will continue to grow our outreach and reentry programs for students who stopped out. These are beginning to yield returns. With MavReconnect, we brought back 63 students who had left within the last three years. These efforts are essential; there is more to be done including ensuring we have clear program pathways for them to complete their degrees.

Yet, there is no more vital tool in our toolbox than the work each community member—staff and faculty—does to connect with, nudge, steer, push, and care for individual students. Our student panelists last week talked about how these connections made a difference. This year, after the separations we experienced for most of the previous two years, we recommit ourselves to doing what we do best—connecting with our students and demonstrating our student-first focus.

- **Imperative 2: Focusing Our Resources.** We ended last year with a balanced budget and strong reserves. These provide us with some flexibility and, more importantly, in what promises to be a challenging budget year, these resources give us the ability to move forward. I am impressed with the work of our finance offices, budget heads, and leadership to ensure our overall financial well-being.

It is worth noting that last year we distributed a record \$172M in financial aid that included federal and state funds, emergency relief and institutional funds. What a remarkable feat that involved the tireless work of so many to process that volume of aid. I know it made a difference. I also want to acknowledge our donors and Foundation board members for their generosity in supporting emergency and retention grants for so many students in need. The level of community support here is humbling and I am grateful.

All this said, the coming year will test our financial skills and fiscal discipline.

I am sure you are aware that the legislature did not pass a bonding bill, nor did it pass any supplemental appropriations for the Minn State system. And, it did not fund a tuition freeze. With flat resources, this will be a financially tight year. And while I still hold out some hope for a special session that will allow us to move forward with the Armstrong replacement project, right now that is stalled. Students facing a 3.5% tuition increase will also feel the added pressure and stress on their finances. For some, it represents a difficult decision about whether they will be able to remain in school.

We have some choices to make.

Last year, we completed the second round of the Strategic Budget Planning process. I know that for many, it was a difficult and frustrating exercise. For me, though, the process was valuable. It helped me better understand how our resources are used and what outcomes we achieved. The process clarified which of our programs draw students here, which equitably retain and graduate our students at the highest levels, and which have the most significant impact in our region and state. This coming year, we will begin redesigning our budget and allocation model to ensure that we align resources with our strategic and institutional goals.

As we start these discussions, the hard reality is that we cannot be everything for everyone as much as we wish. We need to be adaptable and focused. That will mean critically examining processes and procedures, identifying any that get in our way and distract us from our goals. We need to consider what to subtract before we add. How can we lighten the load of people who are already stretched too thin?

I think about how much energy goes into our various workflows across the campus and the new processes, programs, and projects we initiate to support our students better. These may all be valuable, but there must be ways to streamline or eliminate impediments.

The process complaint I hear about most is the Maverick Shuffle-- moving paper from office to office. Too many workflows shuffle paper from place to place often without clarity about where it is at any given moment or its status. Can we lighten our load if we rethink workflows, and eliminate paper-based processes? This year, we will work to streamline and automate our work to help reduce some of the stretch.

- **Imperative 3: Offering an Exceptional Student Experience.** We engage our students in many meaningful ways, athletics, speech and debate, MavMachine, clubs and learning communities, among so many others. We also have outstanding public engagement and

community enriching programs. Hockey Day and the Frozen Four last year were exceptional experiences for our campus community and communities across the state.

We provide opportunities for students to participate in “high impact experiences” including internships, service-learning projects, faculty and student research, global study programs, mentorships and more. Our new School of Agriculture and Minnesota Polytechnic initiatives are good examples. They will connect the needs of our community and region to new ways of providing experiences that meet the needs of new and future learners. These experiences connect our students to the world beyond our classrooms and labs. They enrich our curriculum and introduce our students to new paths and passions.

Moving forward, we have real opportunities to strengthen and heighten the quality of these experiences so that every student can engage. We do a lot now. This is a year to coordinate the many pieces and opportunities on our campus in an accessible, rich, and meaningful way for all our students.

As many of you know, one of the most meaningful experiences was my participation in speech and debate in high school and college. College debate, when I participated, began each academic year with a single national proposition and all teams in the nation debated that proposition for the entire academic year. Each team at each tournament would debate half the tournament affirming the resolution and the other half opposing it. That is a powerful exercise. I learned how complex issues can be and how few have a right or wrong answer.

I mention this because as both a debate coach and rhetorician, I always loved election season. I got to moderate debates and provided media commentary as candidates laid out positions, discussed them, and navigated the complexities of moving from issues to ideas to policy.

I am disheartened by the quality of some of our national political discourse. It can be polarizing and angry. It does not invite participation or dialog. It often focuses on people instead of issues or policies that will move our communities and nation forward. It is not constructive and does not help us achieve our potential. I was in a meeting last week with regional leaders, one of them reported that in his neighborhood people have stopped talking about important issues because of fear of reprisal for a political opinion. I suspect this may not be the exception. We need to be better.

Universities must continue to be a place for constructive conversations and dialog—no matter how challenging or difficult. This is a place for exploration and discovery. Ideas are examined, researched deeply, and considered from more than just two points of view. Our university needs to be a place where inquiry, debate, and discussion help us educate and not vilify.

That is why I am pleased to announce this Fall we will host candidate forums about the issues and policies that will shape the future direction of our region and the state. Not everyone will agree with every position. That is a good thing. Education and learning are about exploring and grappling with challenging ideas. I liked the point made by one of our student panelists at the retreat last week. He said he attended meetings held by various political groups on campus—not because he agreed with any group but because each showed him a different point of view. I liked his comments.

In coordination with our student leaders, we will work hard to ensure that every student who wants to will know how to register and vote.

- **Imperative 4: Caring for the Health and Well-being of Our Educational Community.** Demand for health care, access, and equity for mental and physical health has been heavily discussed in the national conversation. And our campus is no different.

During the past year, I was genuinely impressed when I met with the various service centers and support areas across campus. We offer students a wide array of services including pharmacy, medical lab, counseling, and tele-psychiatry. Our learning support services range from research help, tutoring, and tech support. Our MavPASS program has shown remarkable success with its peer-facilitated support and supplemental instruction. Our food pantry and garden help with food-insecurities and ensure students don't go without. This past year, an incredible 171K pounds of food went to students in need. All of these help our students find ways forward and support their success.

Of course, there are challenges. One of the most important is how best to align our support systems to meet the needs our students have. We are launching new tools for advisors this year which will help. Expanding “Ask Stomper”, our chatbot, should provide access to a wide array of resources and referrals at any time of the day or year.

A “Gold Folder” will be available today on all university computers, providing our staff and faculty with referral information and resources to help any student in need.

We have begun a series of short videos called the Maverick Minute to highlight the services students may need. These will play on social media and around campus throughout the year.

And, over the year, we will continue to refine and enhance student access to mental and physical health services.

But, as I mentioned earlier, continually doing more for our students comes with a cost, and people can become stretched too thin. We need to be intentional about how we support our workforce.

That is why, this year, we are working to implement a flex work schedule to help with work-life balance. As I mentioned to our community last spring, implementation challenges will undoubtedly occur along the way. Still, in the end, we will have a system that maintains and even improves our level of service, provides for equitable distribution of work and responsibilities, and enhances the experience of our community.

Further, we will emphasize professional development and have opportunities to recognize the often unsung work on our campus. Recognitions and appreciations are important.

One way we will do this in the coming year is through the Presidential Maverick Challenge coin program. We made 150 challenge coins and I have distributed these to 11 people whose task throughout the year is to look for those who do the exceptional work that makes this a special place. The goal is to showcase who we are at our best and highlight those who make the most significant differences.

- **Imperative 5: Ensuring a welcoming, equitable, and inclusive university.** I believe our University has done a tremendous job developing a welcoming culture of inclusivity, but that work never stops and there is more to do. We must ensure that every person who walks our halls and enjoys our beautiful grounds feels welcomed and invited. A welcoming and equitable university requires community, strong positive relationships, and a shared commitment.

The President's Commission on the Status of Women has worked toward these goals and will continue this year. And these were the goals in the last strategic plan implemented by the President's Commission on Diversity. Turning these goals into action will be the focus of the plan currently under development. Reaching our Destination 2030 goals depends on our success in making our environment equitable, inclusive, and welcoming for all learners and employees. This commitment resonates with our system's focus on Equity 2030 and ensuring all qualified learners have access to higher education.

We continue to have some success in decreasing opportunity gaps and improving degree completion rates. Our faculty and staff have worked hard to make this a reality. The pandemic set us back in some areas and we have more work to do. This year, we will focus our efforts on the systemic issues that impede our progress. We will conduct a climate survey to provide a baseline from which we can design the next steps.



We have had significant success with changes to financial hold policies. Our emergency grants made a difference. However, we have work to do with clarifying degree and transfer pathways, ensuring our prerequisites align clearly with degree learning outcomes and developing a proactive relational approach for supporting our students.

I speak with our students regularly. We are educating learners committed to addressing significant issues ranging from climate and sustainability to social justice, racism, and equity. That is why this year our university will partner with our student leadership to adopt two priorities advanced by students: a commitment to sustainability and a commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusion.

Over the weekend, I walked around campus and met many students and families as they moved into residence halls. They were excited, optimistic, and looking forward to the new year. They do not take earning a degree lightly. There is sacrifice and a drive to succeed and make their voices heard. They want to know that what we do here will help empower them to make the difference they want in their world. They trust us, and invest in us because of our promise and commitment to their success.

This past year was a year of strategic thinking and learning. It was an opportunity for us to look honestly at what is going very well and what work needs to be done. I applaud all of you for participating in the many conversations leading to this point. The work you have done and continue to do strengthens us and will move us boldly forward. The Star Tribune recognized us as the Gold Best College/University in Minnesota for 2021, and I am confident we will earn that recognition again this year. It reflects our commitment to one another and our students and state.

What has become clear to me is that we are reshaping what it means to be a regional university. Our region and our community ground our efforts and strengthen who we are. But we are not defined or limited by our space. Our reach is global.

A great institution is not known just by the achievements of the past. It is known for how it drives toward a future that prepares students for what is to come. And that is why it is time to put pen to paper ... or rather fingers to keys ... and write our next chapter. Reaching our Destination 2030 goals and becoming a transformational leader in higher education will require bold action. And that action begins with creating not just strategic plans but providing concrete steps to meet our goals. Our work will make this institution gravitational—we will be a place that draws learners, communities, talent, and entrepreneurs to this region.

Our planning forward will take work, and it will take our collective commitment to make it happen. But together we will grow the University into a place that supports both learners and employees, cultivates a diverse culture of thought and ideas, and opens doors for our students to

lifelong pathways that today we only dream of. We are Mavericks, and today we begin the journey to Our Destination.

Go Mavs!