

**President Edward S. Inch**  
**Now Is the Time**  
**Convocation Address**  
**August 14, 2023**

Good morning, everyone. And welcome to the launch of a new academic year—it promises to be an exciting one.

Thank you for the introduction, Dwayne, and thank you all for joining us this morning.

Sierra, I particularly appreciate you for sharing your goals and vision for this year as our student body president.

At the outset, I want to take a moment to recognize the important work that is taking place in St. Paul today and tomorrow. Negotiating teams representing the Minnesota State system and the Administrative and Service Faculty bargaining unit are working hard to reach an agreement and avert a strike that could begin as early as August 21<sup>st</sup>. Our ASF colleagues are valued employees who contribute greatly to the exceptional experiences our students have. And, while the outcome of these talks is beyond our control, I am truly hopeful and optimistic that these teams will reach a positive settlement.

Yet, there are many difficult conversations occurring across our campus and many of our colleagues are struggling with difficult choices.

No matter how this critical week of choices goes, we will remain a community committed to the success of our students. As the bargaining teams continue to seek a resolution, I hope we remember the importance of mutual respect, care for one another, and, most importantly, the community of support we have created. This is a challenging and difficult time, and I wish we in this room could resolve it. But that is not within our power, so we move forward respecting the needs and challenges of our colleagues, focusing on supporting our students, and pushing forward toward our goals.

This morning, I want to talk about what we can control, the strategic direction for our University. How we generate the BIG IDEAS that will lead to INSPIRED ACTIONS that strengthen the social, cultural, and economic fabric of our region, state, and beyond.

We already have a great story to tell, and our faculty and staff have positioned us to achieve our next level. We have more than 135,000 living alumni, the majority of whom live in Minnesota and power one of the nation's best economies. We have produced entrepreneurs, educators, innovators, social workers, scientists, poets, pilots—just a few from a long list. The point, though, is that we, working together, make a positive difference in our world.

Last year's study of our economic impact helps us tell this compelling story. Our institution has an \$827M annual impact to our economy, we contribute \$59M in state and local revenues, and almost \$10M in community contributions. Beyond the numbers, though, we add to the vibrancy

of our community through concerts, athletics, theatre performances, gallery exhibits and lectures among so many other connections we have throughout our region.

Last June, and you may have read it, alumnus Souleymane Toure contributed an opinion piece to the *Mankato Free Press*. Souleymane is a 2012 graduate out of our Finance Program. Currently, he serves as Head Budget Analyst for the US Department of Defense and is recognized as a leader in financial and economic modeling in the Pentagon.

His piece, titled “Before the Pentagon, it was MSU,” is a tribute to the work you do every day. And, just in case you don’t know it to your core, the work you do impacts lives in deep and positive ways—and sometimes, in the moment, we may not recognize it.

Souleymane makes the important point that our community and campus together throughout our history have developed an exceptional culture that inspires people.

Souleymane wrote:

“to those of us shaped by this incredible town, Mankato is more than a small town with [an] unfamiliar name. It is a town into which the true sense of community is embedded, where people tend to strangers from all over the world. It is a town that values kindness and embraces culture no matter the origin and rallies around its flagship university as its source of diversity, community, and excellence.

Mankato is the epitome of excellence in higher education in a small town ... MSU instilled in me rigor in education, perseverance in the pursuit of one’s dream, and equity and fairness in life.”

That is a powerful sentiment that I see in action every day. The relationships we have with one another, with our students from across the globe, and our community all together weave the social and cultural fabric in which we all thrive. That is what is remarkable about this place.

I think Soulemane’s conclusion captures this sentiment:

“Mankato is the start for so many. A small town with deep community values that embraces everyone. I formed lifelong friendships with so many. A population that comes running towards strangers and shows them what it means to be a community member.”

Last week, at our annual leadership retreat, a diverse student panel made the same observations. An excellent education on a campus that cares about student success and their well-being in a community that embraces our students from around the world and who came to us from so many different pathways.

As an aside, the panelists identified one of the significant indicators that students are welcome in our town--many, many of our merchants offer “Student Discounts.” To the panel members, that simple gesture created a strong, positive connection.

We have something truly special here.

I want to pause for a moment to recognize some of our outstanding community leaders who help shape this place and strengthen our culture and build connections:

- Jessica Beyer, CEO of Greater Mankato Growth
- Jeff Brand, State Representative
- Scott Carlson, Mayor of North Mankato
- Najwa Massad, Mayor of Mankato
- Paul Peterson, Superintendent of Mankato Area Schools

Thank you for being here today, and even more importantly, thank you for your tireless work supporting our cities, region, and state. Your partnership and friendship with Minnesota State Mankato makes a difference. It's appreciated.

Of course, our successes don't surprise me—anymore anyway—our students, faculty, and staff work hard to make a difference.

Let me give you some examples:

- 2023 Douglas R. Moore Faculty Research Lecturer, Dr. David Sharlin, shared his research findings on thyroid hormone disrupting chemicals and nervous system development. Many of his students attended the lecture with him and many more have gone on to research in critical health fields inspired by his dedication to this work.
- Dr. Vicki Hunter, professor of Sociology, directs our Scholars Serving Time program. It offers life-changing opportunities helping prison inmates earn their degrees.
- Dr. Sheen Chiou, professor in Speech, Hearing, and Rehabilitation Services, works with our students to support community members with dementia in the Engagement program.
- Our 2023 Distinguished Faculty Scholars, Drs. Kevin Filter, Rachel Cohen, and Vincent Winstead, all exemplify meaningful work happening at Minnesota State Mankato. Their work in psychology, biological sciences, and electrical and computer engineering are pushing boundaries and pushing students to continue to study, inquire, research, and write throughout their lives.

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This year, at the Distinguished Alumni event, we recognized the accomplishments of three outstanding alumni making a difference:

- David Backus, Alumnus in Applied Organizational Studies was a Maverick hockey player who went on to play professionally for 15 seasons. He and his wife, Kelly, founded Athletes for Animals, an organization that has awarded more than \$1M in grant funding for animal advocacy groups.
- Aaron Holm, a 1990 Public Relations graduate who, following his own tragic accident founded Wiggle Your Toes, a group that helps amputees regain independence and mobility.

- Nelsie Yang, a 2017 graduate in social work, became the youngest and first Hmong American woman elected to the St. Paul City Council, where she now advocates for the future, she wants to see.

And there are so many others with compelling stories. We educate students who make a difference.

I am immensely proud of this work that we all do. Even better is for the third year in a row, Minnesota State University, Mankato was recognized by the Star Tribune as the best college or university in the state.

For the past two years, our campus engaged in a planning process grounded in our history, community, and successes and looking forward to what we need to become in a rapidly changing world. Through the many serious conversations and discussions that comprised this work, we talked through the many challenges our campus, like other universities, is likely to face: significant changes in technology, competition from other universities, remaining affordable, maintaining enrollment, and demonstrating every day the value of higher education.

A lot of people participated in this process on and off campus. And, through all those conversations, I appreciate the candor you brought and the visioning we engaged in together.

Through that work, Destination 2030—our strategic roadmap for the next several years—was designed, discussed, and debated. It was written, rewritten, and written again. Thank you for your patience as we worked through that process—the work was important as we looked for a shared commitment about our future. And thank you to everyone who participated in that process.

Today, we begin to turn our plans into action and move our University forward. Destination 2030 is our roadmap. It seeks to strengthen partnerships throughout our community and build a synergistic region that works toward the betterment of our community. As we talk about our story of place—our history, dreams, culture, and character—the strength of our partnerships within our community is vital.

I have shared with people that our goal, the goal of Destination 2030, is 30 by 30. Thirty-thousand students by 2030. That seems like a daunting, if not impossible, task especially when our current enrollment numbers are half that. As I explained, though, it is a matter of perspective.

Destination 2030 pushes us to provide an excellent education for all those who cross our threshold. We will educate every eligible Minnesotan, and beyond, with the programs they need when they need them whether they are an undergraduate, graduate, working adult, return learner, or business.

Destination 2030 makes four commitments:

**First, we will be a lifelong provider of access to an equitable and affordable education.**

Our goal is to be the first choice for undergraduate students and provide exemplary experiences that prepare them for their future. Building on established excellence in our graduate programs, we will look to expand in areas of critical need and opportunities that shape our region, state, and beyond. We will expand our professional development and continuing education programs to ensure that all learners, at any point in their career and lives, have access to rich academic opportunities.

Our path forward depends on the connections we develop across the region and how successfully we can become a talent hub that energizes innovation and entrepreneurship. We will improve the transfer student experience and identify better ways of transferring credit and awarding credit for prior learning. And we will implement a strategy for equity and inclusion that supports the education of the diverse array of students who seek the opportunities of higher education.

There are headwinds to be sure. You may have seen an article in the Star Tribune at the beginning of August with the title: “Minnesota is losing more college students than it attracts, a troubling trend.” Yes, it is. Currently, an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 eligible students leave our state for their degrees. And we face a projected demographic cliff in three years that will further erode enrollment.

Those students we educate in our Pre-K–12 system are recognized as among the best educated in the country. That is excellent and we should be proud. It also means more competition for our students with many other universities entering our market.

At the same time, public confidence in the value of higher education has wavered. Are we good value for the dollars invested? Every data point I have says “Yes!” The success of our alumni says “Yes!” But as you may have read in the Wall Street Journal last week, the behavior of some universities casts a shadow on all. The article, “Colleges Spending Like There’s No Tomorrow. These places are just devouring money” cites one university, in particular, that for the last decade spent an average of \$805,000/day on campus improvements.

That wasn’t us. In fact, of the public 4-year universities in our state, we charge the least tuition. We are very proud of the excellent and affordable education we provide our students. Additionally, the North Star Promise program recently passed by our legislature and signed by our governor provides a tuition and fee-free pathway for qualified Minnesotans. Our task is to get the word out, tell our compelling story, and be the campus of choice.

## **Second, we will be a leader in transformative learning generating inspired action.**

There was a time when three or four lectures a week, a lot of homework, a research paper, and a final exam, defined the bulk of the curriculum. Not any longer. Over the past few decades, technology transformed how we teach and engage our students. Over this decade and into the next, technology will come faster and have increasingly disruptive effects.

That means making strategic investments in high-impact learning, including connecting students with industry leaders, offering real-world experiences in every degree program, and looking to what’s happening in model programs like MinnPoly, the Glen Taylor Institute for Nursing, Twin

Cities and Iron Range Engineering among others. It means leading the nation in identifying areas of need and providing opportunities, like what is happening with the Center for Rural Behavioral Health. It means creating infrastructure that provides learning spaces that accommodate new learning models, such as the Armstrong Hall replacement project. Thank you to our legislators for getting the Phase 1 bond proposal passed.

Making those connections to provide every student with access to high impact opportunities will require investment into a reimagined Center for Strategic Partnerships that will help coordinate community engagement with our university and students in a way that provides internships, fosters mentorship, and creates impactful experiences.

**Third, we will be a community of care built upon diversity, inclusion, and belonging.**

How we create an environment that is inviting to all people and instills a sense of belonging requires the collective efforts of our university and regional leaders. I want to applaud the Mankato Area Foundation for its leadership with the Greater Mankato Inclusivity Study. The study highlighted regional strengths, such as higher education with 81% of respondents feeling their community offers quality higher education and postsecondary options. That's a phenomenal number and speaks to the great work already happening here. The survey also spoke to areas for improvement such as housing and access to financing. Areas that will require our collective attention. This is important work.

The University's Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion conducted a climate study on our campus last spring. It revealed areas of excellence with 76% of respondents indicating they were generally or very satisfied with campus climate and 87% recognizing that our diversity is a strength. At the same time, many people reported hearing negative remarks about racial or ethnic identity or about sexual orientation and gender identity. So, while there is some good news, there is work to be done.

On campus, the President's Commission on Diversity and the Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion have been tasked with developing a strategic plan to accomplish three goals: 1) strengthen campus climate, 2) collaborate with the Greater Mankato Diversity Council to integrate regional efforts with our own, and 3) move forward with the Minnesota State System Equity 2030 goals.

I want to take a minute to describe Minnesota State's Equity 2030. Launched in 2019, Equity 2030 seeks to eliminate educational equity gaps at every Minnesota State college and university. This is an ambitious goal and a necessary one. Success means a better educated population who may be the next great inventors, entrepreneurs, or healers. This is incredibly important work that lays the foundation for building a regional talent hub.

**And fourth, we will be a nimble and innovative steward of resources.**

Using our resources, human, physical, and financial, prudently is important. We need to ensure we are focused on meeting our goals while providing opportunities to innovate and explore next steps. Over the summer we began redesigning our budget process to better target investments

and provide better incentives. Conversations with regional leaders about internships, mentoring, and student experiences are core to this effort.

Early last fall, I invited a team from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities to review our organizational structure and offer feedback on how we might organize more efficiently. They were asked if any of our structures interfered with our mission and were there duplicative efforts that could be coordinated better or eliminated. Their review prompted some powerful and intense conversations across the University that helped all of us take a close look at how we do things and why we do them that way. Change is hard. These discussions and debates, while often tense, were a healthy way of looking at ourselves and yielded some of the initiatives I've described this morning.

Out of these discussions, some of our functional areas have been changed. We now have an Administrative Services unit that combines Human Resources, Title IX/Equal Opportunity, Scheduling, Data Integrity, System, and Liaison functions under my office. By the end of this academic year, Athletics will also report up through the President's office.

We will continue to work toward automated workflow and reduce the Maverick Shuffle experienced by our students. We will put in place both internship and transfer directors.

The new MavConnect advising program will launch this fall. Utilizing predictive analytics to provide timely advising and wraparound services, professional advisors, faculty members, and other campus service centers will have much better access to tools and insights. Part of this effort includes professional development and certifications for advisors.

Finally, in response to the very real need for a strong internal communications system, we are launching The Fountain today. The Fountain is a place for us to share and easily find the information needed by our faculty and staff. A direct link button is being pushed out to all University computers today, and the development team will be sharing more details over the coming days.

The Destination 2030 goals are broad, and they are ambitious. They will take time to fully implement. But they focus our efforts going forward to overcome the challenges we are likely to face in the coming years.

Right now, we have the opportunity to think forward and be the exemplar of education through our connections, relationships, and intentions. As you prepare for the academic year this week, I encourage you to visit the red sculpture between the Memorial Library and CSU. That sculpture is called Waves, and the artist, Arnoldus Grüter, said, "Waves symbolizes in static form the dynamic action of the ocean and a university." Let this sculpture, that has stood on our campus for more than 50 years, stand now as a reminder of our opportunity to think forward and act with dynamic intention.

Go Mavs!