

**President Edward S. Inch**  
**The Future Requires Us to Be Mavericks**  
**Convocation Address**  
**August 19, 2024**

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

Roshit, I'm grateful you are here to share your goals and vision for this year as our student body president. I look forward to the continued partnership with you and the student government.

And I want to welcome some of our partners, elected officials, supporters, and other dignitaries who are joining us this morning:

Scott Carlson, mayor of North Mankato  
Minnesota State Representative Luke Frederick  
Brenda Kelly, Provost at Gustavus Adolphus College  
Shannon Nowell, mayor of St. Peter  
Della Schmidt, CEO of Greater Mankato Growth  
and  
Andy Wilke, Executive Vice President of Greater Mankato Growth

Thank you for being here today, and even more importantly, thank you for your partnership and friendship with Minnesota State Mankato.

A couple of weeks ago, the *Star Tribune* reported that for the fourth straight year, Minnesota State University, Mankato is the best college or university in our state. That recognition is a testament to the work we all do here. The people we serve, our students, our community, and our partners see our value reflected in how our students add to the fabric of our state. I am immensely proud of our students and deeply appreciative of the university community that educates them.

We do good work here. Educating our students is our core purpose. Our mission promises to promote learning in service to our state, region, and global community. We aspire to help our students go further than they thought possible to realize their passions, achieve “great things,” and accomplish their dreams.

Our work equips students to grapple with the many challenges and opportunities they will face. We prepare all our learners to act in ways that reflect core values of integrity, inclusion, responsibility, and excellence.

We don't do this work alone. Close community and business partnerships open doors of opportunity for students and allow them to extend their skills and abilities into the world. When our students realize their dreams, that doesn't just impact our university. It impacts families, businesses, communities, our state, and far beyond. I've said it before: we are a regional university with a global impact.

It is not surprising that the *Star Tribune* reported a few weeks ago that thirty of Minnesota's top 50 publicly traded companies, 60%, are led by people who earned their degrees at a state university or other moderately selective school.

In the last year, I have read headlines challenging the value of higher education, read about campuses clearing out library collections of controversial books, and seen pictures of dumpsters piled high with books that some thought contained ideas college students shouldn't read.

By contrast, we are and have been, for some time, a campus committed to inquiry and debate about the **big ideas** that might positively affect our world. We work to test those ideas with **real-world thinking** about how to improve the lives of others. We take the **inspired actions** needed to address the significant challenges of our communities and world. That is our mission. That is what makes us Mavericks. And that is why the future requires us to be Mavericks.

There are so many examples of the work we do that I can't name them all, but even a cursory review of the last academic year is inspiring:

- More than 2,500 students crossed our stages at Commencement exercises last year. Some were the first in their families to earn a degree, and that accomplishment will set those families on a powerful new trajectory.
- I think about the work being done by our 2024 Distinguished Faculty Scholar Award recipients:
  - Professor Afroza Anwary's research on global land conflict, human rights, genocide, and gender-based violence is challenging the way we view gender-based crimes.
  - Professor Laura Harrison's work examining race, motherhood, public health, and gender brings these conversations to broad audiences.
  - Professor Jessica Schomberg's work, which examines disability in libraries in depth, is helping create more inclusive work environments for many.
- Consider the work of Urji Hussein, our Becky Taylor Fellow, whose clinical project entitled "Enhancing Cultural Competency through Human Interaction Simulation" identified healthcare gaps in cultural competency and offered recommendations for improvement.
- Partnering with GreenSeam, faculty members Megan Roberts, Steven Formanek, DQ Spencer, TJ Brown, and honors student Kiera Laney published the 2024 State of Ag report, which will not only inform GreenSeam's work but also inform food and ag businesses as they look to make critical decisions this year and into the future.
- Dr. Rajeev Bukrali and the team for the Midwest Undergraduate Data Analytics Competition brought 38 student teams from throughout the Midwest and more than 100 industry leaders to campus. They focused on using data science and artificial intelligence

to harness data to find meaningful insights, improve decision-making, and catalyze innovation.

- Working with external partners, Dr. Phil Larson and Andy Brown in our EARTH Systems Lab received a grant from the National Science Foundation to study the Rapidan Dam failure and the impact that event has had and will continue to have on the Blue Earth River Valley.
- And, of course, our student-athletes are achieving goals and breaking records everywhere.
  - Like our amazing men's and women's Division II basketball national champions
  - like Denisha Cartwright, Emmanuel Matadi, and Jabez Reeves – all Mavericks who represented their countries in the Paris Olympics.
  - like our Dance team that was a double national champion in 2024
  - and like our intramural Handball team that won its third straight national championship

There are many more examples of our community pushing the boundaries and achieving high levels of success. This new academic year promises to build on these successes and extend our university's reach in new and innovative ways.

You may have noticed the posters outside the Ballroom when you came in. I asked each university division to outline its primary goals and projects for this year so everyone here this morning can see the excellent work happening across our university.

Please let me express my deep gratitude and pride to all who work so hard to make our university great. And, thank you to all those who put today's program together, including our AV, reception, and the barbeque, we will all enjoy later. We have something special here. Our university community is bold, innovative, and, in short, true Mavericks.

As we begin the new academic year, I am optimistic about what we will accomplish. We will have our challenges, but we are also dedicated to providing the best possible experiences for our students.

Last year, we launched the road map to help guide our choices and keep us focused on our priorities. *Destination 2030* commits us to taking concrete steps toward a transformative future. This year, our path will continue to be guided by the four main pillars outlined in that plan.

First, we will pursue being the university of choice that provides **lifelong access to an equitable and affordable education**. We are committed to expanding access to exceptional educational experiences, developing and launching programs that support learners of all ages, and being known as a welcoming campus that embraces all eligible learners and the diversity of pathways and backgrounds that led them here.

While this work is campus-wide, I especially appreciate Academic Affairs' steps to ease transfer barriers and develop credit for prior learning options. Decreasing barriers to transfer is a significant long-term goal, and this work will help us achieve it.

I admire the work of many faculty and departments, creating greater flexibility and developing alternative delivery modes and formats to improve student experiences. One example, in particular, is our MinnPoly project. The only polytechnic institute in the state, MinnPoly is building solid partnerships on and off campus to provide immersive and engaged engineering opportunities. Partnerships with MinnState campuses and Minnesota businesses will provide excellent experiences for our students and a more robust workforce for our partners.

I look forward to seeing how we progress over this year.

Last year, we served 18,500 individual degree-seeking students. We served another 5,700 students through our University Extended Campus. This year, we will work to join the Global Network of Age-Friendly Universities, a worldwide movement that aims to provide educational opportunities across a learner's lifespan.

Last year, I committed to the goal of 30 by 30—educating 30,000 students by 2030. I remain confident that we will achieve this goal.

Second, *Destination 2030* **commits us to being a leader in transformational learning.** Part of that goal is offering every student equitable, high-impact learning and engagement practices. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities defines these as Capstone courses and projects, collaborative assignments and projects, common intellectual experiences, diversity and global learning, ePortfolios, first-year seminars and experiences, internships, learning communities, service learning, community-based learning, research, and writing-intensive courses.

We already have many of these in place with tremendous success. Students who are more engaged and see value in what they learn outside the classroom are likelier to complete their degrees. The challenge is ensuring that **EVERY** student has equitable access to complete at least one high-impact practice. We need to commit to this.

To that end, last year, we reorganized and created a new Student Success and Engagement division to support this goal. This year, we will work with established and emerging public-private partnerships from all sectors, including business and industry, civic and community, and education.

As part of this commitment, we will begin working to achieve the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. This classification acknowledges and strengthens our collaborations with our community and our commitment to achieving significant student outcomes. I am immensely proud of MSU's close relationship with the Mankato region, which goes back to our founding. By working in partnership toward shared goals and sharing knowledge and resources, we strengthen one another to our students' benefit.

Succeeding with this work requires a university-wide commitment. Our Advancement team, for instance, is doing a great job supporting the mission to bring high-impact opportunities to learners. From scholarships to research grants to emergency grants, our alumni and many others support the efforts of our faculty and students to pursue degrees, conduct research, and provide rich experiences.

Last September, we announced a formal collaborative relationship with the Mayo Clinic Health System. That partnership has brought together collaborative work groups focused on educational experiences, health and well-being, and research. This is a perfect example of the power of community partnerships. Together, we have begun identifying and deploying efforts to address strategic workforce needs and educational opportunities, such as internships, clinical practicums, and professional development.

Our third commitment in *Destination 2030* is to **be a nimble and innovative steward of resources**. While I am optimistic about the year ahead, I also know that resources are tight, and we must make some difficult choices.

Last year, Chancellor Malhotra and his team visited several system campuses, listening to community feedback about the critical needs of our colleges and universities. From those conversations, our System developed a set of legislative priorities. Among these were:

- Funding for Phase 2 of the Armstrong Hall replacement project. You may recall that we already received funding for Phase 1, Planning and Design, which is moving along well.
- We asked for HEAPR (Higher Education Asset Preservation and Replacement) funds to replace the Taylor Center roof, which has reached the end of its serviceable lifespan.
- We also requested a supplemental budget to offset the effects of inflation, compensation increases, and escalating operations costs.

None of these were funded. Throughout this fall term, our new Chancellor, Scott Olson, and his team will visit campuses across the state and once again ask for community and campus feedback as our system develops its advocacy agenda for the next legislative session. Although Mankato will not host one of these sessions this year, please attend one if you can and ensure your voice is heard. We will post the schedule.

What does this mean for the upcoming year? We will continue to advocate for the Armstrong Hall replacement. It's necessary and critical if we are going to continue the level of quality our students and business partners expect. Likewise, HEAPR funding for the Taylor Center roof replacement is vital for a facility that hosts many of our campus and community events—and is home to two national champion basketball teams. Moving forward with these projects is critical.

The failure of the supplemental budget proposal, though, is one we will feel immediately. Last spring, many of you engaged in discussions during Meet & Confers and Town Halls devoted to the subject. Those were meaningful opportunities to gather and discuss data and explore options for new revenues, retention strategies, and efficiencies. I'm grateful for the ideas you all shared during those sessions. A few themes rose to the top, and we are exploring those options now.

Over the summer, campus leaders met to discuss short—and long-term strategies to address the shortfalls. For this fiscal year, we will use a combination of general and non-general fund one-time funds to backfill gaps and pause hiring for some positions that will be delayed until the next biennium. New revenues and enrollment opportunities will be explored, and some will start during the year. This year will be tight, but I am confident we can be successful as long as we remain disciplined.

However, this year, we must prepare for the next biennium and design our approaches to resource allocation and managing shortfalls. This will be significant work, and I hope all of you will take the opportunity to be engaged. As I mentioned, much of this year's imbalance will be covered by one-time funds that will not be available to us next year. More information about how to engage in the process will be coming soon.

While reductions to address short-term shortfalls are necessary, they are not long-term strategies. We must continue investing in programs and students to keep our University focused on our mission and vision. We must continue to innovate, push forward, and invest in big ideas to support the University's and our community's growth.

Let me give you a couple of examples of how we will invest in our students and region's success:

- This year, we will launch the new School of Applied Agricultural, Food, and Natural Resources. This is a powerful example of meeting workforce needs in high-demand areas and partnering with others to achieve the goal. This school will offer a new degree in applied agronomy. The classes for that degree program will be offered collaboratively with South Central College. Students will attend courses provided by both institutions to complete the degree. The school of agriculture will officially launch this year and will be a great model for innovative educational delivery.
- The Maverick Innovation Gateway, primarily funded by donors and grants, will open in 2025. It will be a hub for interdisciplinary learning within our region, a place for students, faculty, and industry professionals to collaborate, develop real-world skills, and align learning with the job market's needs.

Resource challenges are complex and almost always involve the temptation to cut our way to balance our budget. While we need to be responsible with our resources, identifying new revenues, finding new ways of working, and streamlining what we do are equally important. A lot of good is happening here that supports our students and elevates our university. This will be a year of deciding where to focus.

The final pillar of *Destination 2030* commits us to **being a community of care built upon diversity, equity, and inclusion**. The system-wide initiative Equity 2030 has helped shape much of our equity work over the past few years. However, long before Equity 2030, our campus was at the forefront of equity work by establishing our LGBTQ+ and Women's Centers, among many other initiatives. This work is deeply embedded in our campus and part of our DNA, and as the system "scorecard" published last year shows, we do a pretty good job overall. We have a lot to build on and need to continue building.

Last year, we conducted a university-wide climate survey. The results were telling. While 79% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they feel welcomed at our school, and 77% of employees agreed or strongly agreed that they feel welcomed at work, there are other areas for concern. For example, only 38% of employees and 58% of students agreed or strongly agreed that our campus takes appropriate action when people have been harassed or discriminated against. We need to do better. Our approaches to addressing microaggressions, accessibility, first-generation students, students of two or more races, and sexual orientation, among others, need to be strengthened.

In 2022, at our annual retreat, Vice President Morris and I shared the plan to work on the initiatives outlined in the national Moon Shot for Equity project. Over the summer, we codified our partnership and collaboration to become the first Minnesota college or university to join. I look forward to implementing Moonshot this year along with the new Equity 2030 strategic plan, which should be completed shortly.

The Moonshot project connects us with other universities, provides webinars and professional development opportunities, and uses our data to help focus proactive decisions and actions.

Moonshot emphasizes four key areas:

- Leadership and Campus Climate – including providing formal training on change management and equity-focused professional development.
- Access and Enrollment – including strategies to expand recruitment, enrollment, and retention efforts and removing barriers to re-enrollment for adult learners.
- Academic Policies and Practices – including college-level gateway courses in writing and math to ensure timely progression, creating undergraduate academic degree maps, and continuing our ongoing work to streamline transfers.
- Finally, Student Support and Belonginess – including technology for proactive advising and creating a coordinated care network across offices, such as financial aid, career advising, support services, and counseling centers, to collaborate on appropriate student support easily.

We already have many of these features in place. We will need to develop others, requiring concerted effort and collaboration among our units. Moonshot and the forthcoming Equity strategic plan will help us make great strides toward meeting our Equity 2030 goals. This work is imperative for our university—not just because it helps enrollment and student outcomes, but because it is right for our students, families, and communities.

Before I close, I want to discuss the political climate and our University's role in the dialogue.

Conflict is an endemic part of our daily lives. All of us are touched by conflict and violence daily, whether in our communities or our world. According to the Geneva Academy, there are

more than 110 armed conflicts across the globe, affecting millions of people. Many of our students, faculty, and staff have been affected, as I am sure have many in our community. I do not doubt that those in conflict seek peace. However, the goal of peace is seldom the issue; instead, it is how people pursue peace.

This is an election year, and as is the case with elections, conversations can become tense, and sometimes people turn to violence. Within political discourse, we hear divergent views of how peace can be reached within our country and the rest of the world. Those differences can spark violent acts. Even in the last few weeks, we have seen the attempted assassination of the Republican presidential nominee, and the city of Chicago is bracing for protests and violence as the Democrats begin their national convention today.

To achieve peace, we must be equipped to engage in honest and meaningful dialog to share perspectives, perceptions, ideas, and insights. However, that only happens in supportive environments that encourage discourse. Universities can and should provide that environment.

My family, immigrants to the US, was deeply affected by global conflict—conflict beyond their control yet shaping their lives. From an early age, I learned that education is the key. My parents were both teachers, and I became a teacher. Education equips us to grapple with the world's great challenges and find peaceful ways to overcome them.

Education helps people find pathways out of senseless violence and needless death. It is our great hope, my great hope, that our students will be the innovators, leaders, and peacebuilders of the world they inherit.

When we do our job well, our students become the peacebuilders in their communities and world. We equip them to problem-solve, seek answers, and use their creative and critical abilities to challenge what needs to be challenged and build what needs to be built.

In this election season, we all have a responsibility to help improve our world. Our local and national candidates for political office have widely differing ideologies, viewpoints, and experiences. Each will focus on different priorities and directions. We need to take the time to understand the differences and similarities. Then, we need to commit to getting out the vote. Our informed ballots are an essential step to creating the communities and world we want to live in.

At our core, open dialogue and free expression are critical to fulfilling this university's mission. As we start this new year, I ask that we all lead with an openness to dialog and welcome peaceful discourse.

For my part, I will continue to protect the rights of free speech, expression, petition, and peaceful assembly for our students, staff, and faculty. And I will continue prioritizing our community's health and safety. Together, we must foster a culture that welcomes and engages many points of view.



We have incredible opportunities ahead of us. There is a reason we were again voted the best College or University in the state. There is a reason we remain the largest university in our system. And, there is a reason our students excel. That reason is our campus community.

I am surrounded by some of the best in their fields, who bring excitement and innovation to their work every day. Yes, this year, there are challenges. But I ask each of you to continue to be bold, inspired, and passionate Mavericks. If we work together to push forward despite our challenges, I have no doubt we will continue to thrive.

Thank you, and as always, Go Mavs!