

President Edward S. Inch
Lead with Belief in the Power of Higher Education
Convocation Address
August 18, 2025

Good morning, Mavericks!

Thank you, Dwayne, for your introduction, and thank you all for being here today. It's good to be together again, in community, and with a shared purpose for the year ahead.

Andrew, thank you for sharing your vision and goals for this year. I look forward to a continued partnership with the student government. Your commitment to student advocacy is vital to our progress and success as a university.

And welcome to our partners, elected officials, supporters, and other dignitaries joining us this morning:

- Tom Sexton, Representative, Minnesota House
- Keith Allen, Representative, Minnesota House
- Aaron Eberhard, District Director, Office of Congressman Brad Finstad
- Jeanne Poppe, Southern Minnesota Outreach Director for US Senator Tina Smith
- Richard Davenport, president emeritus, Minnesota State University, Mankato
- Jessica Beyer, Deputy Director, Region 9
- Andy Wilke, Executive Vice President, Greater Mankato Growth

Your presence reminds us of this university's deep connections with our region, state, and nation. I often say that we are a regional comprehensive university with a global impact. That statement is especially true as we open a new academic year and imagine what the year will bring.

Before we discuss strategy, goals, and the year ahead, I want to start with a story because behind every plan, enrollment figure, and budget number, lives are being changed here.

Ethan Winters is a student in our elementary education program. But that statement doesn't capture his journey. His path to this moment was anything but easy. Growing up in Janesville, he navigated his father's long illness and his personal battle with anxiety and depression. By high school graduation, by his own admission, Ethan felt lost.

But what changed Ethan's life wasn't any single moment; it was a chain of people who showed up.

- A high school teacher, Zach Bartosh, MSU alumnus, provided encouragement, hope, and guidance. Zach's Maverick spirit motivated Ethan to succeed and share that hope with others.

- After high school, Ethan enrolled at South Central College. While his grades weren't great, his advisor saw potential where Ethan didn't. She listened to him, challenged him, and believed in him, staying connected even after Ethan transferred to MSU.
- When he transferred to MSU, faculty and staff continued that support. When Ethan applied to our online education program, he was unsure if he'd be accepted, unsure if he could continue. But we saw something in him, too.
- Then, during a Zoom call with advisors from South Central College and MSU, Ethan learned he had received the \$25,000 Marie Eustice Scholarship through the Annexstad Foundation. That scholarship, made possible by a donor who believes in the power of higher education, offered essential financial support and showed Ethan that we believe in him and the positive impact he can make on this world.

Ethan's story is not an outlier. It's a reflection of what happens every day at this university.

- It's what happens when a faculty member stays after class to help a struggling student.
- It's what happens when an advisor sees potential in a student who is ready to give up.
- It's what happens when a donor chooses to invest in someone they've never met because they believe in the power of education to change lives.
- It's what happens when alumni return to their communities and inspire the next generation.

This is who we are, and this is what we do. We live our mission day in and day out.

Even when faced with challenges, Minnesota State University, Mankato stays strong and resilient. Our ongoing success proves the exceptional work happening across campus and the trust our students, partners, and communities have in us.

Today, we serve over 18,000 degree-seeking students and provide professional development opportunities to more than 6,000 learners from throughout the Midwest and globe. We are the largest university in the Minnesota State System and second largest in the state after the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Students choose us second only to the U of M. And, we are growing. This year, graduate enrollment is up over 9%, and transfer students are up over 6%. Overall, University enrollment is expected to increase 2.7%. One in three baccalaureate degrees awarded in the Minnesota State System comes from this institution. More than 1,800 graduate students working toward a Master's or Doctoral degree conduct research, outreach, and service through their programs. International students comprise ten percent of our student body, representing over 100 countries. These are all strong testaments to our reach, relevance, and results.

What makes this impact possible is the remarkable expertise, passion, and dedication of the people who work here. For instance, I think of Dr. Mika Laidlaw, whose Douglas R. Moore Faculty Lecture offered a moving exploration of the immigrant experience through art. I think of the team at the Kearney International Center, which worked tirelessly to support our international students through uncertain and difficult times. And I think of this year's Distinguished Faculty Scholars—Drs. Oksana Kim, Phillip Larson, and Michael Olson—whose research is advancing their fields and elevating our academic reputation.

If you need more proof of the impact across campus, look at the Maverick Challenge Coin recipients featured on The Fountain. In every department, individuals go above and beyond to support our students and each other. Their efforts are not only noticed; they are deeply appreciated.

And we are not alone in recognizing the value of our work. For the fifth consecutive year, Minnesota State Mankato has been named Minnesota's Best College or University. That honor doesn't happen by chance. It reflects the confidence of our alumni, partners, and supporters. They believe in our mission and trust us to continue shaping lives and strengthening our communities. That's why it's no surprise that our community, friends, and alumni contributed to the largest-ever year in fundraising, raising over \$34 million. In just five years, our university endowment has grown from less than \$70 million to over \$100 million, with most of the funds going toward scholarships and programs to give more students access and opportunity.

As we look to the year ahead, we do so with clear eyes and a shared sense of determination. We know this year won't be easy. State funding has decreased, pressure on our available resources is growing, and we are asking more of ourselves than ever. Despite these challenges, we must focus on our mission, strategic goals, and objectives. Our strategic plan, *Destination 2030*, is our dynamic framework designed to help us adapt, innovate, and lead with steady resolve.

The first pillar of *Destination 2030* calls us to be a lifelong provider of accessible and equitable education. We are taking bold steps to fulfill that promise.

For instance, the Division of Academic Affairs has made significant progress on our comprehensive academic plan. This forward-looking framework describes how we will implement our strategic vision, align with our state's emerging opportunities and economic needs, and support our students in achieving their educational goals. This plan is more than just a document; it's a commitment to flexible, student-focused strategies that center on our mission and institutional goals, quickly adapt to the changing landscape of higher education, and secure long-term sustainability for our university.

We are also taking tangible steps to support students' timely graduation and reduce long-term debt. For example, this year, the University is shifting from the 12–18 credit undergraduate banded tuition model to a new 13+ credit structure. Under the new model, students will pay a flat tuition rate starting at 13 credits, with any additional credits beyond that available at no extra cost. This change promotes academic momentum and supports student success. By averaging 15 credits per semester, undergraduate students are more likely to graduate in four years, saving time and money and reducing debt.

We are strengthening transfer pathways to ensure students experience a smooth transition to our university, regardless of their starting point. We are expanding partnerships with community colleges, tribal colleges, and regional employers to make education more adaptable and responsive.

These efforts and more reflect our broader commitment to ensure every student choosing Minnesota State Mankato has the chance to succeed, no matter their background or circumstances. When we prioritize access and opportunity, we don't just open doors; we walk alongside our students until they achieve their goals.

The second pillar of Destination 2030 is our pledge to be a leader in transformational learning; learning that inspires action and equips students to make an immediate impact in their communities and careers.

This commitment is not new. Our academic community has long been an innovator, ensuring students gain real-world experience they can use after graduation and build on for a lifetime. That tradition of excellence shines brightly.

There are many examples.

Consider the School of Applied Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources, launched last academic year. This school is already building global partnerships and fostering innovative collaborations. Working closely with the Region Nine Development Commission, we are connecting students with leaders in the agricultural industry—ensuring that the next generation of professionals is prepared to lead with knowledge and purpose.

We also celebrate the launch of the Rural Behavioral Health Clinic, which was made possible through the generous support of our federal and state legislators and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota. This clinic is more than a community-based outpatient center; it's a groundbreaking academic training site for students in social work, counseling, psychology, nursing, and related fields. It is the only clinic in the state focused specifically on integrated outpatient mental health services for rural Minnesotans, and it represents a powerful intersection of service, education, and innovation.

And then there's the Maverick Innovation Gateway. Thanks to our partners at Nidec, Schwab, and many others, the Gateway is becoming a hub for collaboration between students and regional businesses. It's not just a place; it's an invitation to come together, to innovate, and to envision what our shared future can be.

These initiatives are interconnected. They form part of a larger vision. The comprehensive academic plan includes a specific goal area dedicated to community engagement and active learning. It details key strategies to incorporate experiential learning into all programs and delivery methods, ensuring students relate classroom knowledge to real-world issues.

Beyond programs, transformational education is profoundly personal.

Last week, we held our annual campus retreat. As we do every year, we invited a panel of students to share their experiences, what worked for them, and what did not. Each of the six students shared the unique path they took to get here. One was an adult learner who is earning her four-year degree after a successful career and raising a family. Another was an international student from Egypt who started his program in Los Angeles but transferred to a more supportive

and welcoming university. Another was a computer science major who began at another university but transferred to his hometown university because we were more welcoming and supportive.

All six individuals discussed their connections with professors, advisors, and other members of the academic community. They talked about how meaningful and impactful they were. They talked about getting involved with other students and activities. It was impossible not to feel immensely proud of the work we do on this campus.

One story that stood out was shared by a disabled submarine veteran who is using his military benefits to earn his degree. DaVonte A. McClam shared his initial worries about being an older student on campus and whether he belonged here. However, one of our English professors encouraged and inspired him. So much so that DaVonte changed his major to BFA in Creative Writing, with the goal of becoming a professor who likewise inspires students and helps them see their potential. He hopes, one day, to be known by his initials: Dr. Dam. I never wanted to be known by my initials, ESI. Dr. ESI doesn't have the same ring to it.

My point is this: all of us—faculty, advisors, tutors, librarians, groundskeepers, coaches, office assistants, cashiers, everyone—make meaningful connections with our students that change lives and inspire action.

These stories are why we exist. They show that transformational education is not just something we talk about; it's something we do. It is more than what happens in the classroom; it is about what happens when education intersects with purpose, and when students are empowered to lead with both.

The third pillar of Destination 2030 calls us to be a community of care founded on inclusion, belonging, and mutual respect. More than a statement of principle, it is a call to action that impacts every part of our campus and community.

This year we will continue our work on the Moonshot initiative focused on Social and Economic Mobility for all students. This is a comprehensive initiative aimed at student success, system transformation, and removing barriers that prevent students from reaching their educational goals. Last year, our cross-division steering committee and workgroups developed four strategic initiatives we will work to implement this year:

- First, strengthening transfer pathways to ensure students experience a seamless transition to our institution, regardless of where they begin their academic journey.
- Second, reforming our hold policies and practices, ensuring that administrative barriers do not unnecessarily delay a student's progress toward graduation.
- Third, creating a second-chance program for students who have stopped out with credits. Nearly a million of these students are in Minnesota, and we will reach out to them to see how we can help them complete their programs.
- Fourth, developing an integrated, proactive advising model that meets students where they are and provides timely, focused support to help them stay on track. Part of this work

includes developing clear academic degree roadmaps that outline course requirements and timelines, giving students a transparent path to on-time graduation.

Further, this year we are initiating campus-wide conversations focused on developing a new Strategic Enrollment Management plan. Our student demographics are changing as is the makeup of our enrollment. The new plan will focus on our learners' needs and program alignment to ensure students can meet their educational goals while addressing the emerging needs of the economy and new opportunities.

One of our most immediate priorities this year is digital accessibility. Every one of us has a role to play in ensuring that the documents and content we create are accessible. This is not only a legal requirement and a key component of our System's *Equity 2030* goals; it is simply the right thing to do. Resources are available to support this work, including the Digital Accessibility link at the top of The Fountain. I encourage everyone to be proactive as we prepare for the year ahead.

These efforts are not isolated; they are interconnected. They reflect our deep commitment to access, alignment with our region and state's needs, and student success. These initiatives reflect how we live out our values. And they are how we ensure that every student who walks through our doors feels welcomed, supported, and empowered to thrive.

The final pillar of Destination 2030 is our dedication to being a flexible and innovative steward of resources. This involves more than just managing budgets; it requires rethinking how we invest in our mission, create new opportunities, and sustain the work that matters most.

I start with gratitude. There is no question that our state budget is stretched thin. Our state legislators worked hard to minimize the impact of fewer state resources for our university and our System, even as other sectors faced deeper cuts. Thank you. I am also appreciative that the legislature approved funding for the replacement of our Taylor Center roof, which is a heavily used signature building for this campus.

This support is meaningful, and we appreciate it. However, we must also be clear. The best investment our state can make for its future is to fully fund the institutions that educate the workforce of tomorrow, foster innovation, and serve as anchors of community growth and stability. Minnesota State Mankato is doing precisely that, building partnerships with industry, working with local agencies, providing professional development for today's workforce, and inspiring the next generation of leaders.

One-third of our funding comes from the state, the remaining two-thirds is from tuition. Those funds are essential for maintaining our momentum, developing cutting-edge programs, and attracting outstanding students, staff, and faculty. Minnesota State Mankato has more than 135,000 living alumni, and 85% of our graduates live and work in Minnesota. Our graduates power the state's economy. This university contributes nearly a billion dollars annually to the regional economy. But to sustain progress and remain a strong institution, funding needs to keep pace with the demands of enrollment growth, economic opportunities, and workforce needs.

Doing less hollows out those elements that have made us successful. For instance, the Armstrong Hall replacement needs to be a top priority. It wasn't designed to meet the needs of our students or expectations or employers in a fast-changing economic landscape. Its infrastructure is beginning to fail. This is not just a facilities issue—it is a student success issue. Armstrong Hall is the academic core of our campus. It houses 40% of our programs and there are no good alternatives.

Our strength lies in the relationships and connections we have with one another on and off our campus—We see it reflected in the moments when instructors look students in the eye, offer encouragement, and help them find their path. We cannot afford to lose that. We cannot afford to let a failing building undermine the very relationships that define our mission. We are ready to do our part. But we need our state and partners to stand with us.

For our part, we know it is our responsibility to innovate and diversify our revenue streams. And we are doing just that.

This past fiscal year, we achieved a record-breaking fundraising milestone. 8,376 individual donors contributed \$34.5M to fund scholarships, endowments, capital projects, and other vital university needs. Like the scholarship Ethan Winters received, each contribution demonstrates our donors' trust in us and their belief in the transformative power of education.

Through the Division of Student Success and Engagement, we are expanding our global influence by investing in asynchronous, non-credit professional development content that will be accessible to a broad audience. We are also enhancing our career services, including the launch of Minnesota's Largest Career Fair, which will draw employers from across the Midwest to campus and provide direct pathways to employment for our students. Additionally, we continue to develop grants for community engagement initiatives in partnership with the Mankato Area Foundation, Greater Mankato Growth, and Region Nine.

Our University Foundation has established the Maverick Real Estate Foundation, a bold initiative that enables us to accept land donations—creating new opportunities for philanthropic support and long-term investment.

Besides pushing forward our long-term strategies, I am very aware of the need to tackle everyday obstacles and challenges. The system-wide rollout of Workday has been difficult. I truly appreciate the incredible effort our teams are making. The ripple effects of these issues are felt throughout every division, office, and role. To those of you managing these complexities daily, we see you, and we thank you.

We continue working closely with the System Office and other campuses to offer input and solutions. To everyone involved in this effort, thank you. We also have some of our most talented people collaborating with the System Office to develop and implement the NextGen Student module, which will create a more responsive, student-centered infrastructure for the future. I appreciate their efforts on this project.

Even with these challenges, we have a lot to be proud of. We are still the most efficient degree-producing institution in the Minnesota State system. That's not just a statistic—it reflects your creativity, your grit, and your care. But to be honest, doing more with less is not a long-term strategy for sustainability or success.

We need to think differently—not just about what we do, but how we do it. The solution isn't just about adding more. Nor is it about sticking to the same ways we've always done things. We must work together to identify what we can stop, what we can make more efficient, and where we need to focus our energy to adapt to our financial realities. Your voices will guide that process. Your insights will shape the solutions. And your partnership will be crucial.

We also understand that innovation must be part of our way forward. We need to keep exploring new revenue streams and stay open to different approaches. That involves embracing change, questioning assumptions, and offering solutions.

The next few years will be difficult for the state, and the pressure on institutions like ours will grow. But I believe we are ready. Because we are not just reacting to change—we are leading it. And we are doing so together.

I began today with Ethan's story because it's a powerful example of our impact on the world. Dr. Dam's story is one of the power of relationships and belief in the potential of our students. And, one day, because of our work, they will spark others.

That's the ripple effect of our university and the people who work here. That's the legacy we create—one student, one story, one inspired action at a time.

As we begin this new year, I ask you to lead with belief.

- Believe in our students.
- Believe in each other.
- Believe in the power of what we do.
- And believe in the transformational changes that come about when we work together.

Thank you.

Go Mavs!