

2019 University Address

Thinking Beyond Our First 150 Years Bold Visions – Innovative Risks – New Directions President Richard Davenport

Thank you Provost Wells and special thanks to all of you who have taken time out of your very busy schedules to join us here this morning as we begin a new year.

I want to introduce a special guest who is here with us today...Dr. Bob Hoffman.

Bob is no stranger to campus, having served for many years as the Vice President for Strategic Partnerships and as a prior member of the Minnesota State Board of Trustees from 2000-2006. Actually, Bob is the one who hired me as president when he served as chair of the board! Bob is currently serving another 6-year term on the Board of Trustees; and he has for the last several months been serving as the Interim CEO of Greater Mankato Growth. Bob, welcome and we are pleased to have you here with us today. Will you please stand or wave so we can recognize you.

I hope everyone gets a chance to walk around our always beautiful campus and observe a few changes. I recently asked Vice President David Jones about the top comments we receive from the more than 18,000 visitors to our campus—most of them prospective students and their families. According to David, one of their highest and most frequent remarks is about our beautiful grounds and immaculate facilities.

I am clearly not alone in concluding that we have the most beautiful campus among our state's public universities. Our grounds crew is exceptional and deserves most of the credit; that team really understands how important first impressions are for new students and families. Let's all thank the grounds crew who make this happen every day!

You will see a few other physical changes on campus this semester with:

- The ongoing construction of the Maverick All-Sports Dome off of Monks Avenue;
- A new directional university sign soon to be placed at the corner of Stoltzman and Stadium Road and later in the Fall an updated Gateway entrance as you enter Ellis Road.
- In addition, this summer we upgraded Myers Fieldhouse with brand new flooring and track equipment,
- And, we finished the Clinical Sciences Phase 2 project.
- Also, check out the new purple flame on the Wigley Administration Building
- And, starting September 2 you will see our largest ever billboard at the intersection of Hwys I-494 and I-35W in the Cities.

Under the leadership of VP Rick Straka and AVP Paul Corcoran we completed two major facilities plans this past year:

- Our Armstrong Hall Pre-design project,
- And our Comprehensive Facilities Plan.
- We were just recently given 95% approval for our comprehensive plan.
- Thank you everyone who helped to create these two planning documents!

This biennium we are on the bonding list and asking the Minnesota Legislature for pre-design money for our Armstrong Hall project. However, securing funding for this project is not an easy task as the entire project will be close to \$100 million requiring financing over a 6-year period.

This is a huge, but a much needed request for our growing campus. Much of my time this upcoming year will involve advocating to our state legislators about the importance of this project to our university.

Speaking of the current Armstrong Hall projects, an additional building that would serve as a new home for the College of Business and student services has been on the planning table for many years. We are still working to raise private funds for the construction of that important and much-needed building.

Also, as most of you already know, our football stadium is worn out and needs to be replaced. We love the stadium and its great history, but it is time for a new and modern facility that represents the success of our football team, athletics and university. I'm sure Coach Todd Hoffner would agree! In the meantime, we have added safety rails to the stadium steps and a new scoreboard this year—both important improvements, but only temporary fixes as we pursue our goal of a new stadium.

And, we are also looking at the possibility of an additional student residence hall in the near future to meet our needs. At this point, it would be tentatively constructed on land adjacent to the University that is owned by our own Foundation.

At the present time, we are leasing 350 beds in a building near the university to house our students. A little side note: we have evidence that students living in the residence halls, including those in student learning communities, tend to have a higher retention rate than those living off-campus. So, that is one reason a new residence hall is also still under consideration. In the meantime, we continue to improve our existing residence halls.

With all these projects in the queue, you can see that our university continues to be transformed physically as we strive to meet the needs of our constituents. We are proud of having some of the most modern buildings of any Minnesota university. To put this all in perspective, it has only been 50 years since we fully moved to this new campus from downtown. We have come a long way!

It was only a year ago that we finalized our Sesquicentennial Celebration. Coincidentally, at roughly the same time, the Minnesota State Board of Trustees and Chancellor launched a series of statewide forums on “Reimagining Minnesota State.” The outcomes of these forums has led to the acknowledgement that we need to change higher education and our System needs to change along with it.

Today, I do not intend to elaborate specifically on the goals discovered through the Reimagining Forums – you can read more about it on the Minnesota State System Website - however, I will mention that the issue of “student success and closing the gap” tops the list of challenges. In addition, student success was a central focus at our annual fall retreat held just a week ago.

In so many of our discussions over the years, I occasionally wondered if we have the right priorities and are asking the most important questions to enhance our university’s success. During last week’s retreat, I am absolutely positive we zeroed in on many of the important issues and questions. The excitement was in the air! And, true to our nature, we were focused on Big Ideas!

To illustrate my point, the groups and panels directed their enthusiasm on important discussions, such as:

- Focusing on student success, retention and graduation
- Adding more schools and institutes and fewer colleges; agriculture, communications, biomedical, etc.
- Implementing the Common Bell Course Framework
- Developing more online programs
- Reducing the number of undergraduate majors and redirecting funding to high demand programs
- Looking at additional graduate and doctoral programs in high demand areas such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, agriculture, biomedics, and others
- Increasing international enrollment
- Considering a branding message that clearly delineates our institution
- Developing new partnerships especially in Mankato, the Twin Cities and throughout the State and region

You will hear much more about the retreat later this morning during Provost Wells’ remarks, as I have asked her to summarize the day’s general themes and outcomes, and our plans for going forward.

In the big picture, it is clear that today we have many Big Ideas, but we are confronting some crucial challenges. There are changes coming that will have an enormous impact on our university, faculty and students for years to come. We need to be ready and lead the state in addressing those changes.

I thought you might be interested today in hearing a few comments and opinions Chancellor Devinder Malhotra shared with me during my annual evaluation meeting this summer.

“Richard, I am very impressed by the approach your institution has taken that keeps the success of the students at the core and then develops integrated operational structures for both academic planning and student support services. You emphasize data driven decision-making and it is heartening to see that you are putting in place all the building blocks needed for data analytics, predictive analytics, business analytics, and providing access to information to faculty and staff.”

“However...your institution’s overall student success and inclusion metrics...have not altered over the past five years.”

We are failing a large portion of our students. And, we are not alone in our ability to measurably move the needle on student success and closing the opportunity gap. We must do better.

Chancellor Malhotra is also concerned about student retention and graduation at all of our institutions; and this is especially true for domestic students of color. Clearly, we must close the gap for underrepresented students who as a group fall behind white students by 15-20 percent! Other institutions, such as Georgia State University have found the answer to this dilemma...and so can we!

It is urgent that we find the answers now and implement our best strategies. In fact, our success will have a dramatic impact on our future and the nation’s economy. In a recent ***Georgetown study from the Center on Education and the Workforce***, it was pointed out that the degree attainment gap may prove extremely damaging to our nation’s economy as a whole.

- Projections from that study indicate that if our graduation rates continue on the current path, the United States will be short 5 million postsecondary degrees in this coming decade
- There will be plenty of jobs, 164 million, but 65% will require a college education
- Simply recruiting more first-year college students is not the answer
- We know 70% of high school graduates enroll in college after high school and the percentage is even higher for students coming from wealthy families
- The problem isn’t that they are not going to college; a high percentage of these students are simply not finishing
- There are many reasons for this, as you know.

In looking at this dilemma from an economic perspective, we could be entering a vicious cycle wherein our Federal Government may reach a point due to the projected millions of unfilled jobs that we experience a revenue shortage resulting in dramatic decreases in federal financial support for our students. We need to do our part to prevent this potential vicious cycle.

As many of you know, in order to assure that we are successful in our student retention goal, I made a critical administrative change in the last few months. It was clear that we needed a point person to head up our student success initiative. Therefore, last February I appointed Dr. Lynn Akey as our new Vice President for Student Success, Analytics and Integrated Planning and charged her with developing and implementing a coordinated student success plan. Dr. Akey and her team have already hit the ground running. I ask all of you to please give Lynn your utmost attention and cooperation. And, please share your ideas with her. Our future depends on it.

Here at Minnesota State we touch the lives of over 17,500 students annually through credit bearing coursework. These are students who are looking to complete their first degree, earn an advanced credential, or to complete a few credit-bearing courses. A large portion of our students—over 15,700 of the 17,500—are seeking to earn an undergraduate or graduate degree. Yet, far too few students reach their goal of degree attainment with us.

- Over the last three years, we have regularly failed to move 27% of our incoming undergraduate students from the first year to the second year of enrollment.
- Further, we have failed to move 47% of our undergraduate students to completion of a degree in six years.
- Our lack of success with students of color is grim: 35% never enroll for a second year and 63% never walk across our commencement stage.
- Let me restate these failures – almost one-third of our undergraduates fail to enroll the second year and by six years, only half graduate!
- Only one-third of our students of color graduate in six years!

We are not alone in our struggle to support students in being successful. Slowly, other institutions are beginning to figure out the reasons for poor graduation rates. For instance, in a recent 2019 Chronicle of Higher Education article, *The College Dropout Scandal*, an essay from David Kirp's recent book, he makes the case for changing our focus in higher education. Here are a few statements and conclusions from Dr. Kirp;

- *Roughly, a third of undergraduates are the first in their family to go to college.*
- *Public universities graduate a little over half their students.*
- *For-profit institutions only graduate a quarter of those enrolled to earn a bachelor's degree.*

- *Community-college students are meant to earn an associate degree in two years, but even after having been in school for six years, fewer than 40 percent have graduated*
- *Dropouts are nearly twice as likely as college graduates to be unemployed and four times more likely to default on student loans; thus wrecking their credit and shrinking their career options.*
- *Students whose families were in the top income quartile were almost 5 times more likely to have earned a bachelor's degree by the age of 24 than were students whose families were in the bottom quartile. This is widening the gap between the rich and poor.*

The same article also elaborates on solutions to the dropout crisis. A few examples include:

- *Intensive advising programs involving a substantial number of coaches and advisors focused on students and student success are essential.*
- *Incorporating data analytics is important to anticipate which first-year students are likely to need help so advisors can reach them before it is too late.*
- *Promoting a sense of belonging so students are more resilient when confronted with setbacks*
- *Revamping make-or-break classes and emphasizing appropriate remedial courses is very important to student success.*

Finally, one of the most important suggestions is to help more students believe that they belong here at Minnesota State Mankato – that they can reach their goals and succeed here. If they believe this, the better they do academically. The reverse is also true.

Summarizing on a positive note, I am overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of our faculty, staff and campus leaders to find solutions for improving student success. Plus, let's not forget to look back; it is easy to miss our many accomplishments if we are only focused on our problems.

I noted in my 2011 presentation that the goal of being the university and campus of the future is a worthy and ambitious vision. That vision still exists and has led to the Minnesota State University, Mankato that we know today. Standing still is never an option.

Success will continue to be our legacy...only if we maintain our positivity, define the path to greatness, and operate as a team!

Thank you everyone for your important contributions to this university and to our students.

I invite you to return at 10:30 this morning after a brief coffee break to hear Provost Well's address.