

President Edward Inch
Our Destination. Our Future.
Convocation Address
August 17, 2026

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you, President Hiber for your remarks, and thank you all for joining us as we begin a new academic year.

It is good to be together again.

I want to welcome our faculty and staff, students, elected officials, alumni, donors, community leaders, and friends of the University.

I am grateful for the presence of our distinguished guests:

- Mankato Mayor Najwa Massad
- Mankato Area Public Schools Superintendent Paul Peterson
- Representative Erika Schwartz
- Representative Tom Sexton
- Greater Mankato Growth CEO Della Schmidt
- Kathy Sheran, member of the Minnesota Board of Trustees
- Tim Huebsch, member of the Minnesota Board of Trustees and Interim Leader of GreenSeam

Thank you for being here. More importantly, thank you for the many ways you support Minnesota State University, Mankato, and the people we serve.

Opening Convocation offers us an opportunity to celebrate, reflect, and look ahead. It is a moment to recognize how far we have come, set our direction for the year, and speak honestly about the challenges we face.

It also gives us an opportunity to remember a fundamental point: everything we accomplish begins with people. The people in this room, in our community, in our legislature and on our campus.

At last week's campus leadership retreat, the students who joined us made it abundantly clear: their success and engagement begin with relationships. Student Government President Hiber echoed this message again this morning.

Student success begins with a faculty member who recognizes a student's ability before they recognize it in themselves.

It begins with an advisor or staff member who notices when a student is struggling and helps that student find a path forward.

It begins with a donor or an employer who opens the door to a scholarship, an internship, or a career.

It even begins with a grounds crew that makes this campus beautiful and keeps our fountain running, a point one of our student panelists specifically noted.

And it begins with students who place their hopes, their futures, and often their families' hopes in our hands.

My point is simple: relationships matter.

Every person here contributes to the student experience across classrooms and laboratories, offices and residence halls, studios and libraries, and clinics and athletic facilities. Faculty, advisors, counselors, coaches, administrative assistants, facilities employees, groundskeepers, technology teams, public safety officers, dining employees, and so many others make a difference.

One example of what those relationships make possible comes from a 200-level biology course taught by Dr. Keenan Hartert, who will deliver this year's Douglas R. Moore Faculty Research Lecture.

Through our Course-based Undergraduate Research Experiences, CURE, program, Dr. Hartert invited students early in their academic journeys to take responsibility for their own cancer research projects. They explored how different medicines might help the human immune system destroy cancerous blood tumors.

Think about that. These were not graduate researchers or seasoned laboratory professionals. They were undergraduates in a 200-level course, trusted to contribute to real and significant scientific inquiry.

One of those students, Amber Paulsen, described the experience as an opportunity to apply what she had learned in class directly to current cancer research. The work was challenging, yet it felt achievable.

That balance did not happen by accident. Dr. Hartert and the CURE program gave students the guidance, resources, and trust to discover what they were capable of. The project taught research techniques and data analysis, but it also taught teamwork, project management, resilience, and how to respond when an experiment does not go as planned.

Most importantly, it allowed students to see themselves differently, not simply as people learning established knowledge, but as creators of new knowledge.

That is the power of a faculty member who opens a door and says, "You can do this." That is transformational learning at Minnesota State Mankato.

Before I go further, I need to acknowledge the realities of this moment and explain some of the forces shaping them.

Forty years ago, Minnesota students paid about 40 percent of the cost of their education, while the state supported about 60 percent. On our campus today, that relationship has nearly reversed: students pay about 65 percent of the cost of their education, while state support accounts for about 35 percent.

The same long-term trend appears in the state budget. In 1994, higher education represented approximately 13 percent of Minnesota's budget. Recent budgets have placed that share at about 5.9 percent.

During those years, Minnesota has taken on growing responsibilities in health care, transportation, public safety, human services, and many other essential areas. I fully understand that legislators make difficult choices among many important priorities. And I am grateful to the elected officials and public leaders who listen to our concerns, support our students, and advocate for higher education.

At the same time, this long-term shift has real consequences. It places tremendous pressure on the 33 colleges and universities in the Minnesota State system, which share a statewide responsibility to preserve access and opportunity for students across our state.

That pressure is felt here in Mankato. The costs of technology, utilities, equipment, maintenance, compensation, and essential services continue to rise, and inflation has intensified those increases.

We cannot address every rising cost by asking students and families to pay more. Access and affordability are central to our mission. Tuition increases large enough to close the entire gap would put a college education further out of reach for many of the people we exist to serve.

Minnesota also faces a broader challenge. Eligible students are choosing to leave. More than 30 percent of resident first-time undergraduates leave the state for college. Roughly twice as many Minnesota students go elsewhere as students from other states come here.

That matters because students take their talent, energy, and purchasing power with them, and, odds are, they are unlikely to return. In a state facing an aging population, declining birth rates, and workforce shortages, losing young adults weakens the talent pipeline for employers and communities. Minnesota invests deeply in its young people through our K-12 schools. That investment is vital to our state's future. We should work together to give more of them compelling reasons to continue their education, start their careers, and build their lives here in Minnesota. One compelling reason is access to high-quality, modern, engaged universities.

That is not a problem state government can solve alone. It is not a problem Minnesota State Mankato can solve alone. And it is not a problem campuses, employers, or communities can solve alone.

It requires partnership.

Our responsibility is to use resources wisely, improve efficiency, generate new revenue, build programs that meet Minnesota's needs, and demonstrate a strong return on public investment. We also need the state to remain a strong partner in sustaining the institutions that educate Minnesota's workforce and anchor its communities. We need to give students a reason to study and pursue careers here. Our state and higher education infrastructure need to be "stickier."

These realities leave us with difficult choices. Every division and unit in our university has been asked to examine priorities, identify efficiencies, and find new ways to carry out important work.

And when financial circumstances result in people leaving our University, that is never simply a budget action.

It is personal.

Having to let people go is difficult and painful. And the effects have a personal impact on our colleagues, friends, families, teams, and the work we do. We should never lose sight of the people affected by these decisions. I thank each of you for the role you play in furthering our mission during this difficult time, and I ask each of us to support one another as we navigate the changes we will need to make to workloads and processes in order to continue serving students.

I recognize there is a disconnect when we celebrate the university's successes, sustained high enrollment, and significant student outcomes, and yet we are having to make difficult choices and cuts.

This is a moment for honesty. It is also a moment for advocacy and partnership. Public higher education is one of the most consequential investments Minnesota can make in its workforce, communities, economy, and future.

Even under pressure, this University is strong. Our people are talented. Our community believes in us. Our students need us. Our state and region depend on us.

We will face our financial circumstances responsibly, but we will not allow them to define the limits of our ambition or diminish our confidence in our mission and belief in Minnesota.

We are not standing still.

We are moving forward.

Destination 2030 gives us a framework for this moment. It identifies four commitments that describe the University we intend to be:

- A lifelong provider of access to an equitable and affordable education.
- A leader in transformational learning that generates inspired action.
- A community of care built upon diversity, inclusion, and belonging.
- And a nimble and innovative steward of resources.

These are not disconnected initiatives. Together, they describe how we will fulfill our mission in a changing world. They are our destination, and reaching that destination is our shared work.

Our first commitment is to be a lifelong provider of access to an equitable and affordable education.

For generations, Minnesota State Mankato has opened doors of opportunity. We welcome first-generation, transfer, and international students, working adults, veterans, students from rural communities, and learners returning to education after years away. We award 30 percent of all baccalaureate degrees and 40 percent of all graduate degrees in our system. We make an impact.

Today, access means meeting learners through more than one doorway. It means offering flexible credentials, recognizing prior learning, strengthening transfer pathways, and creating opportunities for people to learn while working and living in their communities.

Our Coursera initiative is one example. More than 7,100 learners have enrolled in eight programs to develop new skills and capacities through flexible online professional learning.

Those learners include people seeking career advancement, employers developing their workforce, and individuals who may never begin their relationship with us by walking across campus. They broaden our understanding of whom we serve and bring us closer to becoming a university that supports people throughout their careers and lives.

We are also expanding workforce partnerships across our region and state. When we help an adult gain a new skill, help a business develop its workforce, or help a transfer student move smoothly toward a bachelor's degree, we fulfill our promise of access.

This year, I ask every area of the University to consider a basic question: Where do students and other learners encounter barriers, and what can we do to remove them? What can we subtract to makes us better?

Some barriers are financial. Others arise from policies, schedules, geography, technology, or the complexity of navigating a large institution. Removing barriers does not mean lowering expectations. It means creating clearer paths for students to meet them.

Our responsibility is not only to open the door. It is to help learners see a path through it.

Our second commitment is to be a leader in transformational learning that generates inspired action.

We measure success not simply by how many students enroll, but by what they learn, what they become capable of doing, and how they use their education to improve their lives and the lives of others.

Our students learn through research, internships, clinical experiences, performances, service, entrepreneurship, athletics, student organizations, and partnerships with communities and employers. They test ideas in real settings, solve problems with real consequences, and develop the ability to keep learning long after graduation.

We see the results. More than 90 percent of our graduates find employment within six months of completing their degrees.

This October, our second Career and Internship Expo will bring more than 250 organizations from more than 20 states to campus. It will be Minnesota's largest career fair, giving students direct pathways to internships, professional relationships, and careers.

Employers come here because they know our students are well-prepared. They bring disciplinary expertise, but they also know how to think critically, communicate, collaborate, adapt, and solve problems. Those capabilities grow through the work of our faculty and staff and the high-impact experiences they create.

One powerful example is our Rural Behavioral Health Clinic.

Approximately 80 percent of Minnesota counties are designated mental health professional shortage areas, yet only a small share of counselors practice in rural settings. Our faculty, students, and partners are responding.

The clinic provides counseling, case management, and other behavioral health services to children, adults, couples, and families, including people who are uninsured or unable to pay. It also serves as an interdisciplinary training site where students work alongside licensed professionals.

Graduate student Jasmine Boots hopes to provide care in a rural setting after graduation. Through her work at the clinic, she is learning firsthand about provider shortages, unequal access to care, and the barriers created by distance and transportation.

Students in counseling, social work, alcohol and drug studies, psychology, nursing, and related programs gain the preparation to become future providers. At the same time, people in our region receive care that might otherwise remain out of reach.

Made possible through partnership with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and support from state and federal leaders, the clinic shows what happens when education, philanthropy, government, and community need come together.

We are not only preparing students for the workforce. We are helping build healthier communities in southern Minnesota.

A university education should prepare students for their first job. It should also prepare them for their fifth job, for careers that change, and for their responsibilities as citizens and community members. That is what we do at Minnesota State Mankato.

Our task is to prepare students not simply to enter the future, but to shape it.

Our third commitment is to be a community of care built upon inclusion and belonging.

A community of care is built through daily choices. It is built when we learn students' names, make our courses and resources accessible, listen to experiences different from our own, and hold ourselves accountable for ensuring all students are succeeding.

Our Moonshot teams are turning our Equity 2030 commitments into measurable progress.

Through Second Chance, we reviewed nearly 8,800 student records, conducted more than 700 re-engagement efforts, and helped more than 55 students complete or move toward completing a credential.

Our Hold Reform team brought together 12 campus offices to create a consistent process for reviewing and removing unnecessary barriers. More than 100 faculty and staff have completed the Student Success Advising Academy, and active office hours available to students have increased by 24 percent.

Our Transfer Pathways team has completed or scheduled 57 partnership events, made 157 contacts with community college partners, and launched a transfer-friendly website.

Our Kearney International Center has also provided essential outreach and support during a period of uncertainty for our international students. Faculty, staff, administrators, and students stepped forward to answer questions, connect students with resources, and ensure they knew they

were not facing those challenges alone. An international student on our student panel last week said that all the support and messaging made a tremendous difference during a difficult time.

These efforts share one purpose: ensuring that student success does not depend on knowing the right person, asking the right question, or finding the right office by chance.

Care should be intentional. Support should be coordinated. And the path to a degree should be clear.

The students at our retreat reminded us that belonging is not abstract. A student belongs when someone notices their absence, when their questions are taken seriously, and when asking for help is met with support rather than judgment.

No matter your role, you have the power to create a moment that tells a student, "You belong here."

Our fourth commitment is to be a nimble and innovative steward of resources.

Stewardship requires us to confront financial realities clearly and responsibly. But stewardship is not simply another word for cutting.

It means aligning resources with our mission, becoming more efficient where we can, discontinuing work that no longer serves our students, and protecting the areas most essential to student success.

It also means creating opportunities through partnerships, lifelong learning, grants, research, innovation, and new revenue sources. We must be willing to change how we work while remaining clear about why we work.

One of the most encouraging signs of confidence in this University comes from our donors, alumni, and community partners.

For two consecutive years, our Advancement team has achieved record-breaking results. In 2024-25, it raised \$34.5 million. In 2025-26, it raised \$36.1 million. By comparison, annual giving averaged \$12.1 million during the preceding decade.

That is remarkable momentum. These investments support scholarships, faculty and student research, academic programs, facilities, and the future of Minnesota State Mankato. In fact, for this year, the Foundation has awarded a record \$3 million in student scholarships.

To our Advancement team, University Foundation, donors, alumni, and everyone who builds and sustains these relationships: thank you. Your support creates possibilities. It helps students stay enrolled, equips laboratories, advances research, and strengthens this University's future.

Philanthropy is one part of a sustainable future. Public investment is another.

Our campus has three critical infrastructure priorities: Blakeslee Stadium, which welcomes more than 47,000 visitors each year; Carkoski Commons, home to our student health clinic and food pantry; and Armstrong Hall, the academic heart of our campus.

Through philanthropy, partnership, and careful planning, our campus is taking responsibility for replacing Blakeslee Stadium and Carkoski Commons. That is our Future State project.

Armstrong Hall, however, requires a partnership with the state.

We are grateful to the legislators, state leaders, and community partners who have advocated for this project. Their support has moved the work forward, and we will need their continued leadership.

Replacing Armstrong Hall is not simply a facilities request. It is an investment in teaching, student success, workforce preparation, and the future of southern Minnesota.

We are prepared to do our part. We ask the state to stand with us in completing this essential work.

Resource constraints are real. So is our capacity to respond. We can make thoughtful choices, listen to one another, find better ways to serve students, generate new resources, and make progress together.

Destination 2030 is a plan for the future, but it also helps us see how far we have come.

We are reaching thousands of new learners through Coursera and flexible offerings. We are growing workforce partnerships and preparing to host Minnesota's largest career fair. Our Moonshot teams are removing barriers. Our donors have supported record-breaking fundraising. And every day, our faculty and staff create the relationships students tell us are essential to their success.

These accomplishments belong to all of you, to those who teach and advise students, recruit and welcome them, keep our campus operating, secure grants, raise funds, build partnerships, manage complex systems, and advocate for resources.

They belong to alumni, donors, community partners, and elected leaders who understand that the success of this University and the success of this region are inseparable.

Most importantly, they belong to our students, whose determination gives purpose to everything we do.

We should celebrate how far we have come. But we are still on the journey.

This year, I ask us to focus on three things.

First, protect the relationships that make this University special.

Our programs matter. Our facilities matter. Our systems matter. But students experience this University most powerfully through people. In a time of pressure and change, we must not allow urgency to crowd out humanity. Take time to listen, encourage, and notice who may need help.

Second, use our resources with both discipline and imagination.

We must be responsible, and we must remain ambitious. Bring forward ideas. Question processes that no longer serve students or employees well. Look for opportunities to collaborate. Help us identify not only where we can save, but where we should invest.

Third, tell our story.

Tell people about the student who found a path because someone believed in them. Tell them about the research improving lives and communities. Tell them about the graduate leading a business, classroom, clinic, or public agency. Tell them why Armstrong Hall matters, why Minnesota must invest in public higher education, and why Minnesota State Mankato matters.

Think back to the Amber Paulsen example I gave or to any student you've had the opportunity to interact with. Years from now, they may not remember a particular class, research project, performance, or football game.

But I suspect they will remember a person.

Someone who was present.

Someone who listened.

Someone who made a difference.

That is the work before us this year, and it is worthy of our very best.

Our challenges are real, but they do not diminish our mission. They make it more urgent.

Our resources may be constrained, but our capacity to care, imagine, collaborate, and lead remains extraordinary.

Our community believes in us.

Our students are counting on us.

And our future is something we will build together.

Let us begin the 2026-27 academic year with clear eyes, open hearts, and confidence in what Mavericks can accomplish.

Thank you for everything you do for our students, for one another, and for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Go Mavs!