

President Edward S. Inch
Chapter 7: The Destination
Convocation Address
August 16, 2021

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scFlaeVP5bw>

Thank you, Provost Martensen, and thank you to all who have joined us this morning for Fall Convocation and the official opening of the academic year at Minnesota State University Mankato. This day, the opening day of the academic year, just like commencement are the two big celebrations that we have as an academic community, and they are important. This occasion is especially exciting for me because this is my first convocation in my new role as the 13th President of Minnesota State Mankato. I am truly excited about it.

I want to extend a hearty Maverick welcome to our new faculty, staff, and administrators who are joining our community this year. And a thank you to our community members, officials, and elected representatives who support our campus and mission to educate our students, conduct meaningful research, and strengthen our communities, state, and world. I am proud to be here. And I want to convey my sincere thank you to Chancellor Malhotra, President Davenport, Chief of Staff Sheri Sargent, and Belen Fernandez who have all made this transition so seamless and effective. It's a very big move to make and has gone well for the few weeks I have been here because of all the good work they have done, but also all of the work the people on this campus have done

I also want to recognize a very special guest in the audience, Representative Luke Frederick. Representative Frederick is an alumnus of Minnesota State Mankato graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Corrections and was elected in 2020 to the Minnesota House of Representatives where he represents District 19B, the Greater Mankato Area. Not only is he joining us today, I will also have the opportunity to meet with him 1:1 in a few weeks to discuss our university, community and our bonding project! Representative Frederick, thank you for joining us this morning. We truly appreciate your attendance and support.

I have been fortunate to speak with many regional leaders since I began, including our governor, elected state representatives, the mayors of Mankato and North Mankato, our city manager, the president of South Central Community College, the superintendent of Mankato Area Public Schools, and the President and CEO of Greater Mankato Growth just to name a few. In each conversation, the same themes were clear:

- First, our university plays a vital role in the health and vitality of our cities, region, and state.
- Second, everyone has a positive and meaningful story to tell about the work we do.
- And third, through strategic partnerships in our community, we have the potential to elevate and transform our university and region even more.

For the past year and a half, we have experienced the collective trauma of the COVID pandemic. It forced us to confront the brutal realities of need, equity gaps, racism, separation, among so many others. Our university adapted quickly to support our students. We redesigned our instructional delivery, policies, and infrastructure as we transitioned from in-person instruction to remote delivery in isolation from one another. The separation our community lived through was challenging. Yet, we did well because, in our community, we care for one another, and our passion for our students' success was paramount, and it made a difference.

I wish I could tell you this morning that the pandemic is behind us and that we are in the post-pandemic world. We are not. A week ago, we returned to requiring masks while indoors, and last Wednesday, the governor announced that all state employees need to provide proof of vaccination or be tested weekly beginning September 8 to reduce the spread of the virus.

A student wrote to me how disappointed she was that the university was taking these steps. I am disappointed as well. But, in making decisions and focusing our efforts, I am guided by two overarching values. The first is the success of our students. That is at the heart of our mission and our promise to our families, communities, and state. The second is the health and well-being of our educational community. We are living through an extraordinarily difficult time, and all of us feel different pressures and concerns. This year and beyond the pandemic, it is imperative for us to show empathy, compassion, and care for one another.

The challenge I face is that sometimes these two values conflict, and I do my best to balance those tensions every day. The coming year will ask us to adapt to our changing landscape while moving our university forward. I believe we have the talent and passion to be successful.

All of this is to thank you for all the incredible work you do to support our students--especially during the last year and a half. And that includes all the "behind the scenes" work you do to help one another and our students that may never be seen publicly or physically. And, despite the virus, there are a lot of reasons to be optimistic for the upcoming year.

As you may have read, the *Star Tribune* recognized our university as the 2021 Gold Best College/University in Minnesota. What a remarkable tribute to be recognized for the work we do in public. The citation said: "Minnesota State University, Mankato has a 153-year history of helping students pursue big ideas through real-world thinking. Their focus is on student support, welcoming diversity, and providing hands-on experiences." And that is exactly what I have found that we do here in my first six weeks. It is inspiring.

I spent much of the summer reading to learn about my new academic home and position--everything from planning documents, financial statements, strategic plans, policy manuals, among many others. But one of the most important for me was *Minnesota State University, Mankato 1868-2018: A Sesquicentennial History* by William Lass. It offered context that described events that shaped us as we evolved from Mankato Normal School to Mankato State Teachers College, Mankato State College, Mankato State University, and finally to Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Histories are important because they recount moments in time that shape institutions, communities, and people. Ours is one of adapting to meet the needs of our students, region, and state. It is one of caring for our students and communities. It is one of exploring our potential, thinking big, and moving forward.

The last chapter in our sesquicentennial history is "Chapter Six, The Post-Consolidation Era." It describes how we positioned ourselves and prepared for our next chapter. This year, we will begin working together to write Chapter 7, Our Destination--hence the title of this talk. My question for all of us is, "Where do we want to go? What do we want to build?" Who are we going to evolve to be to reach that next level to achieve what we need to for us, for our community and most importantly for our students?" When I talk about "Destination," I mean two things. First, we should be, and we will be a destination of choice for a diverse and capable student body. And we will be a steward of our place engaging our communities. The second meaning for "destination" is what we will aspire to be, design, and build as we imagine Destination 2030, our next comprehensive strategic plan?

Last week, at our Fall Retreat with more than 100 attendees representing students, staff, faculty, and administrators I asked them to think big, dream of our best future, and be bold. What is the future we want for our university? What do we want to build together? Our keynote speaker, Cindra Kamphoff, author of *Beyond Grit: Ten Powerful Practices to Gain the High-Performance Edge*, and a faculty member in our very own Sport and Exercise Psychology Department, challenged us as an institution to imagine our best future and not be mired by our frustrations or doubts. Instead, stay focused on our dream and replace doubt with a positive, proactive mindset, and we will be able to do the work. I like that. It is our history and part of our DNA.

None of this is to say that there aren't hurdles to be overcome and obstructions that make some of the work difficult. I understand. But I am hopeful. Across the nation, colleges and universities are working to figure out their futures and grapple with many complex issues. Generally, as researchers at EAB, among others, have pointed out, five broad themes will shape the post-pandemic conversation in higher education. These are the themes I asked people to think about at our retreat and the ones that will be the basis of our strategic thinking this year.

Theme 1: Serving Students, managing enrollment. Demographics are changing; I think we all know this. Nationally, while we may see a slight uptick in college enrollment in the next one or two years, the expectation is that the eligible university student population will decrease 10-15% over the next decade. The overall most significant declines will be in the East and Midwest. The same is true for Minnesota. The census data released last week projects that our population stays about where it is and will be more diverse and older. The Minnesota Department of Higher Education projected that high school graduates will decrease over the next ten years. At the same time, competition for students will increase within our state and with other states.

Minnesota colleges and universities are feeling enrollment pressures now. Although our proactive and focused efforts to move students from admitted to enrolled have been effective, we project to be down 5.1% in overall enrollment this year. While our graduate enrollment increased more than 3%, our incoming first-time undergraduate student cohort has dropped by almost 15%. At the same time, our overall retention rates have increased by nearly 6% in four years. That is outstanding and reflects the hard work of advising, mentoring and educating we do. And it demonstrates how much our students value the education and support we offer. Still, we need to be mindful and adapt to be where our students are, and find ways to attract new students

So, the question I ask is that by 2030, what will our student body look like? What strategies will we put in place to attract and retain our students? What will make us a destination campus of choice? Our history describes the many ways we have adapted in the past. We have tremendous potential with enrollment, including increasing the number of transfer students, developing targeted programs for adult learners, supporting degree completion initiatives, and offering programs that will attract new students. Now is our time to think strategically about where our next chapter leads.

Theme 2: Focusing our resources. Our university navigated the pandemic well, and as a result, our finances are stable. That is good news and one not every college or university can claim. However, our resource base is dependent on our enrollment, and our resources--financial, physical, human--need to focus on ways that best meet the educational goals of our students and region. Some of this work has been done and refined with our strategic budget planning.

Despite the excellent work we do attracting and retaining students, we lose too many. Some because of financial stresses or life circumstances, but others cannot get into or complete their programs. These are opportunities and possible areas for growth.

As we think about our strategic priorities, we should consider the following questions, among many others that will arise:

1. Do we have the right mix of programs and degrees?
2. Are there areas that need more investment and attention?
3. Is there sufficient capacity to meet demand?
4. What professional development is needed as we make shifts?
5. Are there new services, engagement opportunities, and support that will better attract and retain students?
6. What partnerships should we explore?
7. How do we connect with our regions?

There are some excellent examples of our current efforts. The recent announcement of a new food and agriculture degree program is exciting. When I spoke recently at a GreenSeam celebration event, people there were enthusiastic about the opportunities for partnerships, outreach, and connection this type of program offers. Are there other areas to explore? Where

do our opportunities lie? I have spoken with students looking for more engaged, experiential, and "real-world" experiences--all things we have been building toward. The Armstrong Hall replacement, for example, will reflect a more modern, dynamic way of teaching and learning. This project is again ranked well on the MinnState bonding project list for legislative funding in 2022. We are hopeful.

Theme 3: Offering an exceptional student experience. The student experience is vital for two significant reasons. First, the experience is a primary reason students choose a university and then stay at the university. Their experience typically begins with the website and catalog. These serve as our introductions for most students. They tell our prospective students who we are and what we stand for.

We offer a remarkable array of high-quality academic programs that invite extended inquiry, opportunities to work with faculty members on research, and provide for applied learning in the region and globally. We have more than 200 student organizations, athletics, and performing arts. Our students report that they are happy with their campus experience. Generally, they are engaged, with 46% reporting that they sometimes, often, or very often participate in out-of-class campus activities. And more than 80% of our students report that they appreciate our facilities, opportunities to connect, social engagement, and the quality of the experiences we offer in a wide array of types of activities. These experiences are important to our students. You may have read in the *Mankato Free Press* about our Esports program and the number of students it attracts and engages.

In my month and a half on campus, I have found students highly satisfied with their experience here. At our retreat last week, a student panel reflected positively on their experiences and connections with faculty. Earlier in the summer, I met with international students who recounted how vital the support and encouragement were for them being so far from home. One woman I spoke to from Saudi Arabia did warn me that it gets cold in the winter and commented that January in Minnesota was not her favorite month.

And, while students have shared some of their challenges that we will work to address, the most important message is that they like being members of our educational community. They appreciate Mankato and North Mankato. Most of all, though, they talk about the relationships they build with our faculty and staff who helped with meaningful advice and strengthened and nurtured their passions. Those conversations reminded me that wherever someone is in our organization chart, every interaction we have with a student or one another may have a significant effect we might never see directly and yet make a difference.

In thinking about the kinds of experiences and engagement opportunities for our students, I am excited about the level to which our community looks to partner with us to create an even richer experience for even more of our students.

There are challenges, however, that we will need to address. Our four-year graduation rate, while improving, is only at 28% which is lower than it should be for undergraduate students.

Graduate students do better with 82% completing in four years. Our successful undergraduate students graduate with an average of 143 credits, meaning it took them, in most cases, at least an additional year to complete their degree. And there are economic consequences for our students who graduate on average with over \$18,000 in debt. I find it remarkable, however, that over the past five years, our average student debt has fallen from \$21,500 because of increased financial support, philanthropy and because students have increased the amount of time they work. We will strive to reduce this even further.

Over the next year, I hope to have broad conversations about the experiences we want for our students. What would we design that will distinguish us from all the other choices they have? What will help make us a university of choice and a destination for our students?

Theme 4: Caring for the health and well-being of our educational community. This year will be one of care for one another and patience as we reorient toward working together at our campus sites and in our communities. As I mentioned at the beginning, the pandemic has traumatized each of us in different ways. The resurgence of the virus in our current wave is a challenge. We face uncertainty, fatigue, and anxiety. Keeping our campus community healthy while delivering high-quality educational experiences challenges us to be innovative and caring. The decisions to return to a mask mandate and require proof of vaccination or testing for our employees were made to reduce our risks while providing our students with engaged, meaningful experiences.

Even before the pandemic and once it has passed, our students face unique demands and challenges that can seem daunting and that can undermine their efforts and ours. Debt, housing insecurity, food insecurity are all immediate pressures they face.

But more than that, the generation of students we are educating now face significant pressures outside their control that they will be charged with addressing in their lives.

In their 1997 book, *The Fourth Turning: What the Cycles of History tell us about America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny*, historians William Strauss and Neil Howe, projected that our current generation of students will grow up and work in an environment marked by serious rifts and conflicts. Keep in mind that their book was written before most of our students were born. They foretold that the generation being educated now in our universities will face:

- Social distress fueled by class, race, nativism...abetted by armed gangs, underground militias, and mercenaries....
- Cultural distress with the media plunging into a dizzying decay.
- Technological distress with cryptoanarchy, high tech oligarchy, and biogenetic chaos.
- Ecological distress with atmospheric damage, energy or water shortages, and new diseases.
- Political distress with institutional stress and collapse, one-party hegemony, authoritarianism

Their point, made 24 years ago before social media, before Google, Twitter, or Facebook, and before the iPhone or any smartphone, was that this generation we are educating now would be confronted by significant challenges unlike anything since the last 4th turning--1925-1945, the Great Depression, Nazism, and World War II.

Our task is to imagine the ways to support our students' success by recognizing the pressures they face and helping equip them to confront and overcome these challenges. I have listened to people of my generation, among others, criticize the current generation of students for not being tough enough. They say: "I did this or that when I was their age and students now-a-days should be able to as well" or "I paid for college on my own, I'm not sure what the problem is here?" I ask all of us to confront this thought process, because it's wrong. The life circumstances we faced growing up are not the same as the societal pressures students today face. They are simply different eras in our nation's history. Rather than comparing our life experiences with theirs, let's focus on thinking of what our campus and community can do to support them mentally and physically. To help them earn a degree and be the creative problem solvers we need them to be because ultimately, they are the ones that are going to solve these problems. They are the ones that are going to lead the change. To me, it's such a terribly important thing to know that students work hard, and they face external pressures that are significant. I have been impressed by the US young athletes like Simone Biles who have been public about the need for support beyond just, "Pull yourself up." That was an impressive, scary and bold thing to do [at the Olympic Games]. I think it's time for us to think really boldly about how we are going to do this. The questions that I have then are, how do we as a campus move forward? How might we partner with our communities for our students to move forward and support their efforts? Quite literally their success will make a difference in everyone's lives.

Theme 5: Ensuring a welcoming, equitable, and inclusive university. I saved this theme for last because, in many ways, the strategies we develop for each other theme depend on our success here. When we admit a student to our university, we affirm that they belong here, they can be successful, and that we will commit our resources and talents to support their educational journey.

I have reviewed our diversity strategic plan and recommendations made by the President's Commission on Diversity for continued progress toward eliminating equity gaps. The plans and recommendations are thoughtful and forward-thinking. And, we have made significant strides. There is more to do but, over the past five years, students of color have increased from 16% to 19% of our student body. However, we have not had the same level of success with diversifying our staff and faculty. We have improved retention by 11% up to 75%. That's a good number but not quite the university average of 78%; it needs to get there. Across campus, and in every division, I know there are efforts to improve. Just as one small but meaningful example, one person described for me how their department rewrote position descriptions intentionally to be more inclusive and had success attracting more diverse and gender balanced applicant pools. There are lots of things that we can look at, that we can change and that we need to focus on.

I have no doubt that we have a common, deeply held commitment to the goals of the Minnesota State system initiative Equity 2030 and the elimination of all equity gaps. And, while we have made progress, what remains unclear to me is what the pandemic's impact is going to be and what efforts we need to adapt to ensure that every student has a sense of belonging on an equitable and inclusive university.

Despite our efforts and commitment, we still have significant work to do. For example, whereas 28% of our students graduate in four years, our students of color lag behind. The six-year graduation rate for our students of color has improved by 9% but remains behind the institutional average. We will address this. As a university when we admit somebody, we are saying that they are fully capable of being successful here, our task as an educational community is to ensure that their success is what we are going to embrace and support. I know that our faculty and staff are focused on ensuring that we have an inclusive and equitable campus, and our students can help--they want to help, and they have offered. This year we will move forward on our Equity 2030 plans with a clear focus on eliminating gaps. And I will ask that we think big and be bold in our approach, share innovative ideas, and build our diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus.

Over the course of this year, I am asking each of you to engage with me around these five themes--as well as others you think the university should focus on. Starting this week, I will be visiting departments and groups around campus. I have been sharing these ideas with our stakeholders as well. I genuinely want everyone's thoughts about what our next chapter will be. As part of this effort, I tasked IT Solutions with deploying a platform that invites ideas, conversation, and feedback--think of it as a positive social media platform for our university. I am hoping for many good ideas that we will distill and focus into our strategic agenda for Minnesota State Mankato's Destination 2030.

After my talk and as you leave for a short break, people around the room and at the doors will have cards with a link to Communities--our platform. I invite you to join the Maverick "community" and help us write our university's seventh chapter.

I cannot tell you how happy I am to be here, how much I appreciate the support and insights I have learned from many of you and representatives in our community. Every day I learn more, and from the ideas people share and from the passion we have for our place and our people; I know that I am in the right place at the right time, and I look forward to the work we will get to do together.

Thank you for being here today and Go Mavs!