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All-University Convocation

Thur., Aug. 21, 2014
10 a.m. – 11 a.m.
San Diego State University

Remarks of President Elliot Hirshman – as prepared for delivery

Thank you, Provost Enwemeka, for your remarks and your leadership. It is wonderful to have you here.

Thank you also to David Ely and J. Cole for your perspectives. I look forward to working collaboratively with you in our tradition of shared governance.

Convocation is a time for reflection, a time of great promise, and I am very pleased to be here with you today.

I want to begin by congratulating all of our honorees on their accomplishments. Today they join a distinguished tradition of faculty Monty award winners. Please join me in recognizing our honorees.

I also want to recognize our staff who planned today's events.

This year, we have many achievements to celebrate. These achievements and our hard-fought budget stability provide us with a special moment, a powerful opportunity – an opportunity to establish ourselves as one of our nation's leading public universities.

I'd like to begin by sharing a few of our successes with you. I apologize in advance; time limits me to mentioning only a small subset of our achievements.

International experiences are central to our academic programs, and this past year a record 2,000 students studied abroad.

We also received the largest grant in university history – \$30 million – to offer degree programs in the nation of Georgia. This is an extraordinary and unprecedented opportunity to build a unique international partnership. Let's thank and congratulate everyone who moved this project forward!

Entrepreneurship is another area of distinction, and this year Forbes magazine ranked us No. 18 in the nation for entrepreneurship.

Sustainability initiatives also took a major step forward as we signed the American College and University Climate Commitment.

It was a year of significant development for our campus as we completed our new Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union and Storm-Nasatir-Hostler Hall, began the renovation of Zura Hall and the College of Business Administration and construction on our basketball performance center. Thank you to everyone who contributed to these projects, and thank you all for your patience with all of the noise, dust, construction and traffic!

It was a banner year for new programs. In the first year of implementing our strategic plan, "Building on Excellence," we established our Honors College, our Commuter Resource Center, our Aztec Scholars program, our Aztec Mentor Program, our Pride Center and our Writing Center.

The Arts Alive SDSU initiative brought pop-up concerts and visual art to the entire campus – attendance at arts events on campus nearly doubled.

In research, we identified four areas of excellence, and we initiated innovative academic programs in digital arts and letters, music entrepreneurship and LGBT studies.

Our strategic plan's initiatives are essential to moving our university forward – to turning our dreams and aspirations into the daily reality of a leading public university. Please join me in recognizing everyone whose dedicated efforts helped make the first year of the strategic plan a great success!

We are proud of the numerous campus programs that received national recognition this year. Our veterans' programs were named among the best in the nation by Military Times, and we were again selected as one of the nation's most LGBT-friendly campuses. Our International Business program moved up to No. 8 in the nation, and five graduate programs placed in the top 30 of the U.S. News & World Report rankings.

Individual faculty and staff members also received national and international recognition.

Diverse Issues in Higher Education magazine recognized Frank Harris III and J. Luke Wood for improving higher education outcomes for young men of color.

Philip Holcomb and Ricardo Zayas received prestigious awards from the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Science Foundation, respectively, and Walt Oechel and Forest Rohwer, both of the Biology Department, were named to the list of the "world's most influential scientific minds." With two of the world's most influential minds in one department, I imagine the department has some pretty interesting faculty meetings.

Our students' academic accomplishments were equally impressive.

Doctoral student Elizabeth Kennedy received a Fulbright fellowship for her work on the migration of unaccompanied minors.

Graduates Francisco Candido, Phillip Rey Silva and Linda Honaker will be pursuing PH.D.s in STEM fields at Cornell, Yale and Harvard, respectively. Linda will be joining fellow Aztec alumni Ellesse Carmona and Erin Fletcher, who are also pursuing PH.D.s in biomedical sciences at Harvard.

A larger group of students – over 1,000 – participated in our Sage project with National City. These dedicated students worked to improve sustainability and quality of life in the National City community.

Our Aztecs Rock Hunger food drive also supported our community. Our students raised 227,000 pounds of food – more than twice the amount of the previous year and more than all the other universities in San Diego combined.

Prospective students are taking notice. A record 78,000 applied for admission this year – ranking us eighth in the nation.

In one of the most challenging environments in decades, our faculty, staff and student researchers continued to compete for national grants – bringing in over \$108 million last year.

Highlights included Mark Sussman's \$8.5 million grant to study the use of stem cells to repair heart damage and Greg Talavera's \$2.8 million award to create effective treatments for Latinos with diabetes.

Our research investments paid off in an extraordinary number of significant discoveries – Ming-Hsiang Tsou introduced a method for using social media to track flu outbreaks. Ralph Axel-Mueller and Inna Fishman identified brain anomalies in autism, and Scott Kelley and Pedro Torres found bacteria in saliva that can be used to detect pancreatic cancer.

Our researchers explored the very nature of the universe as Fridolin Weber discovered the existence of subatomic quarks in neutron stars and, just last month, Rob Edwards discovered a virus that affects digestion in over half of the human population.

It was quite a year for discovery on the Mesa.

Last, but certainly not least, Aztec athletics continues a golden era.

Our teams won seven conference championships, the football team went to a fourth consecutive bowl game, men's basketball went to the Sweet 16 for the second time in our history, and Shanieka Thomas won the national championship in the triple jump – the fourth national championship for women's track and field in the last three years. And the remarkable thing is these are only a small fraction of the achievements of the past year.

It is no wonder that U.S. News & World Report named us one of the nation's top "up and coming" universities.

Looking forward, we enter this year in a strong position. As I mentioned at the outset, our campus's achievements and our budget stability provide us with a distinctive moment in our university's history – a special opportunity to establish ourselves as one of our nation's leading public universities.

After the longest period of budgetary challenges in our history, the combination of increased revenue from our many revenue initiatives and a modest increase in state appropriation has stabilized our budget.

This is due, in no small part, to the Campaign for SDSU, which has raised over \$500 million, including a record \$90 million in the past year. Special appreciation goes to our fundraising team, which was recognized by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education as one of the top performers in the nation for the second year in a row.

Revenues from our auxiliaries, the College of Extended Studies, non-resident tuition and student fees have also been critical.

This year we will welcome over 100 new faculty and staff to our campus and fast track planning for our long-awaited Engineering and Interdisciplinary Sciences Building.

To support our hard-working faculty and staff, we have budgeted – contingent on collective bargaining negotiations – for salary increases.

And we also plan to hire over 100 new faculty and staff in the coming year, with the majority of the faculty hires being supported by our student success fee.

Since 2007, we have moved from being a state-supported university to a university that is a public-private partnership. As a public-private partnership, our core financial model is based on funds from both public and private sources.

Looking ahead, we will continue to strengthen our relationship with the State of California and work collaboratively with public officials to increase funding for the university, as well as for need-based programs like Cal grants and Pell grants. At the same time, we will combine funds from private and public sources to support the communal aspirations of our students, faculty and staff.

For example, alumnus Danah Fayman has created an endowment to support internships in the arts – internships that will help our students advance professionally and intellectually. This endowment will support three students this fall and will continue to support students in perpetuity.

So, where do we go in the coming year?

There are two imperatives, and both involve focusing our resources for results.

First, we must aggressively pursue further development of our revenue streams. While we are very, very pleased to have stable funding this year, the long-range challenges for California and the CSU are significant.

This moment of financial stability is the time to create the strength that will allow us to meet future financial challenges.

In the coming year, we must build our infrastructure for generating revenue. For example, building infrastructure to support fundraising will lead to more endowed scholarships, professorships and programs – regardless of the vicissitudes of state funding.

Second, we must – as the title of our strategic plan says -- build on excellence.

We must continue to establish ourselves as a university of the highest quality: where all students achieve success, where faculty, staff and student researchers address pressing societal challenges, where we come together to experience the beauty and power of the arts, and where we harness our knowledge and our talents to support the broader community.

Many in California envision a future in which public higher education is a commodity delivered at the lowest possible cost – that is the path to oblivion.

We will be as efficient as possible, but we will also remain committed to the principle that our university changes lives and that it merits a significant investment from the state and from our entire community.

This year is the second, and most critical, year of the implementation of our strategic plan. In this year, we will be making significant investments – advancing 42 initiatives to “Build on Excellence.”

These initiatives will support student success, provide our students with transformational educational experiences, advance research and creative endeavors, enhance our campus facilities, build our financial strength and bring us together as one SDSU community.

In short, they will move us forward as a leading public university.

As we begin a new year, no one can predict the future – it always beckons to us with some uncertainty.

What I can, however, say with complete certainty is that – as in each of the past 117 years – the work we will do together this year will advance our missions of education, research and service and lay the foundation for our future success.

Thank you for everything you do for the university.

I look forward to a great year, and I am honored to be your president.