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San Diego State All-University Convocation 2015

Thur., Aug. 20, 2015

Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union, Montezuma Hall

Remarks of SDSU President Hirshman

Thank you, Provost Enwemeka, for that introduction and for your dedicated leadership of our academic programs.

I also want to thank Doug and Blaire for their remarks but also for their embracing of the spirit of shared governance. I look forward to working with you in that spirit.

I'm also glad that Perette could join us on behalf of our over 300,000 alumni. We receive extraordinary support from our alumni and are deeply appreciative of it.

I want to begin my remarks by congratulating all of our Monty honorees. As you just heard, they are truly an extraordinary and dedicated group. Please join me in recognizing all of them.

(Applause)

I also want to thank and recognize all of the staff who planned today's events – who are working the audio-visual, who are preparing the food for us at the reception. It takes an enormous amount of work to bring an event like this together. Please join me in recognizing them.

(Applause)

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Convocation is a moment to reflect on the accomplishments of the past year and to look to the opportunities ahead – and what a year it was for us! I apologize in advance. I can only mention a small fraction of our achievements.

Last year, we expanded and endowed our Susan and Stephen Weber Honors College. We hosted a White House convening for high school counselors and an international conference for bacteriophage researchers.

The role of international perspectives on our campus continues to grow. A record 2,400 students had international experiences, eight students received prestigious Fulbright Fellowships, and we endowed the Behner-Stiefel Brazil program.

Not to be outdone, our entrepreneurship programs produced a truly extraordinary outcome. SDSU alumnus Gemechu Abraham, Professor Michael Sloan and their student team created a human-powered grain thresher that produces three times as much food as traditional threshers. Our team won a \$100,000 prize for their efforts but, more importantly, this development holds promise of reducing malnutrition in the developing world.

Just one example of many, many student accomplishments.

Four graduate students earned highly competitive NSF fellowships, and graduate student David Curran received the top research award from the American Solar Energy Society.

We also took major steps forward in supporting our students this year. Funds from our student success fee supported 80 academic co-curricular programs, we grew our internship and mentoring programs and were again selected as one of the nation's most LGBT-friendly campuses.

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Our investments in student achievement have already made a difference. Just last month, our Mechatronics Club took first place in the international robotic submarine competition – beating teams from CalTech, Cornell and USC, and many, many others.

Our faculty and staff members kept pace with our students. Robert Quimby received the breakthrough prize in fundamental physics, Marilyn Chin won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, Kim Stringfellow was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, Ron King was named Fulbright Senior Specialist, Greg Talavera was honored by the American Public Health Association, and Ilenia Battiato received the Department of Energy’s prestigious young investigator award.

Our research and creative endeavors brought special distinction to the university.

Our researchers brought in \$121 million in grants this year – a 12 percent increase from the prior year. These included John Elder’s \$4 million grant for controlling childhood asthma, and Ming Tsou’s \$1 million NSF award to build a social media platform for disaster communications.

These funds are helping us solve real-world challenges. This year, Roland Wolkowicz identified a drug to fight dengue fever, and Kelly Doran and graduate student Brandon Kim discovered an approach that may prevent bacterial meningitis.

We are also putting the arts front and center on our campus. Over 100,000 people participated in Arts Alive SDSU events this past year, including our epic concert version of “Les Mis,” starring Broadway veteran Ivan Rutherford.

Community engagement, as you heard, is a hallmark of our campus, and our efforts were recognized this year by the Carnegie Foundation’s highest honor.

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To support our community, our students raised 305,000 pounds of food for San Diegans in need. Over 2,000 students, faculty and staff participated in our SAGE project – working on sustainability and quality of life in National City – and our veterans' programs supporting our community were again named amongst the best in the nation.

Another important way that we connect with our community is through our athletics program, and it has been a golden era in Aztec athletics. Last year, we won eight conference championships, football went to a fifth consecutive bowl game, men's basketball went to a sixth consecutive NCAA tournament, and a record four teams finished in the top 20 in the nation.

Our excellence is being noticed. We received a record 83,864 applications this year. That is a lot. Yes. (Laughter) Thank you, Sandra.

And our extraordinarily generous alumni, community supporters, faculty, staff and even students donated a record \$97 million to the Campaign for SDSU. As of today, the campaign total is over \$625 million.

(Applause)

It was an amazing year – so what's next?

We are now in the third year of implementing our strategic plan, "Building on Excellence," and our initiatives are becoming achievements.

In the coming year, we will pursue initiatives around four major themes. Each theme is a significant step forward for this university, and each theme is an essential part of "Building on Excellence."

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First, we will continue to build smaller communities of support within a larger campus. In the coming year, we will increase the number of freshman commuter students in small learning communities to 1,000 and develop a peer-mentoring program for sophomore commuter students.

Essential elements of this theme of building smaller communities of support include our Pride Center, our Women's Resource Center, our Commuter Resource Center, the Aztec Mentor program, the Weber Honors College, the Aztec Scholars initiative, our regional alumni outreach and the Celebrating Aztec Faculty and Staff program.

Our second theme is enhancing the quality of our students' educational experiences.

We are expanding high-impact practices, such as student research, study abroad, service learning, entrepreneurship, internships and leadership development. We are also providing more support for students facing academic and financial challenges. These efforts include Provost Enwemeka's advising initiative, our Writing Center and our new Math Center.

Our University Senate's consideration of appropriate class sizes, the hiring of additional faculty and staff and increasing faculty and staff compensation through IRP and equity programs are all part of this important theme.

A third theme involves the evolution of our approaches to research and creative endeavors.

In research, we are focusing on collaborative, multi-investigator projects. To support this approach, we are developing seven areas of research excellence and building our Engineering and Interdisciplinary Sciences Complex.

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In the arts, we will continue the effort to build an arts-rich campus. Through our Arts Alive SDSU initiative, we will be pursuing the integration of arts into courses across our campus and creating signature events that bring our entire community together.

Our final theme is creating a campus that is a destination – a place where people want to be.

New construction and renovation of our facilities is essential. The Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union, Storm-Nasatir-Hostler Hall, Zura Hall, Page Pavilion, the Jeff Jacobs JAM Center, South Campus Plaza and the Engineering and Interdisciplinary Sciences Complex – they're all part of this effort.

Maintaining the campus – renovating, painting and repairing, increasing accessibility for all on our campus – are also essential.

Creating a campus that is a place where people want to be is, however, about much more than having a beautiful campus. Thus, our One SDSU Community initiative that brings our diverse community together, our SAGE project that advances sustainability and quality of life in our region, and our Celebrating Aztec Faculty and Staff program are all part of being a campus that is destination – a place where people want to be.

These four themes – building smaller communities of support, enhancing the quality of our students' educational experiences, evolving our models of research and creative endeavors, and developing our campus as a destination – they represent significant steps forward for our community, and they're essential parts of "Building on Excellence."

I want to close with a reflection from playwright Tony Kushner that speaks to the work that we'll do together this year. Kushner writes:

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“The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction. From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs.”

These poetic words convey a simple truth. Everything that we accomplish in life depends on what we do together.

As we begin this new year, no one, none of us, can predict the future. It always beckons to us with some uncertainty. What I can say with complete certainty is that, as in each of the past 118 years, the work that we do together will lay the foundation for our future success and build our community’s legacy.

Thank you for everything you do for the university. I look forward to a great year, and I am honored to be your president.