

President's Fall Address to the University

September 16, 2015

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The original line I wrote for this address was that Fall Addresses are special. But I took it out because that isn't true: they aren't.

- Fall is special.
- The return of students to our classrooms and the energy that courses through the veins of the campus is special.
- The sense of renewal is special.
- The all-university picnic with its symbolism of the trials through which we have persevered and the celebration of what we have accomplished is special.
- The address itself? Not so much. More like the price of parking at a great event.

(Ugghhh – I was told not to ever mention parking in public...)

This is my 7<sup>th</sup> fall address as I near the start of my 8<sup>th</sup> year in serving with all of you as president. Maybe it's age – maybe it's watching colleagues retire -- maybe its watching young faculty we recruited move into the senior ranks – maybe it's watching my own daughters graduate and move on with their lives – but somehow, these years now move faster. Time – and those opportunities that ride on the wings of time, whispering softly to seize the moment – seems more precious. And yet the rhythm of academic life – its counter-seasonal cycle of spring harvest and fall planting – has a quality that soothes in the face of time.

Everything at a university is seasonal – even the questions we ask. In the spring, we're always asking students what they'll do after graduation. This time of year we're asking new freshmen, "What are you going to study?" Many, of course, don't know yet. And to them we always reply, "You'll have time to sort that out; lay a good foundation and it will serve you whichever way you decide to go." And that's what I want to talk about today: using our time to lay a foundation.

Time is an interesting word and concept – it takes roots from words that mean, paradoxically, "an indefinite continuous duration" and "to divide or cut up." I love the concept of time as an indefinite continuum – perhaps because it reminds me of long, slow summers with fireflies among the corn fields of Illinois. (But that in turn reminds me of the summers of 1969, 1984 and 2003, and if you follow baseball you'll know those aren't good memories for Cub fans...but 2015? What would it be like...? Would the world just end...? I digress...)

For the last 7 years, we've used our time to respond to the challenges that higher education faces in our day –

- public defunding with its attendant concerns about tuition and student debt,
- concerns about the R&D base that has underpinned America's great research universities throughout our lifetime,

- cuts to programs that have delivered the discoveries of this university to the citizens of our state since the beginning of World War I.

These aren't issues that will be solved in 7 years; they are issues that we will grapple with throughout our careers. But we know them. We understand them. We have plans to address them, and there's reason to consider that our approach and those plans, while imperfect and always in need of modulation, are working as we had intended.

Indeed, amidst these challenges – in the face of them – CSU excels.

- Enrollment is very strong as we welcome the largest, most diverse and among the most academically qualified class in our history; one that represents every county in Colorado, every state in our nation and 101 countries around our world and one in which 1/3 of our students are the first in their family to go to college. Despite the pressures that come with increased enrollment, retention and graduation rates are up.
- The number of CSU students having international experiences like education abroad has doubled in the last decade—and the number of undergraduates participating in mentored undergraduate research and scholarship has quadrupled in just five years.
- We were selected as the new academic host of the Semester at Sea program – creating extraordinary opportunities for our students and faculty.
- Even as the number of low-income and first-generation students has grown, thanks in part to donor support and our investment in scholarships like Commitment to Colorado, 42 percent of last year's CSU graduates left CSU with zero student loan debt.
- As our enrollment has grown, so has our faculty, with our student:faculty ratio holding steady at 16:1 and 40 new faculty positions funded in the budget last year alone.
- The productivity of our faculty is reflected in another year of research expenditures in excess of \$300 million.
- We've continued to energize our historic commitment to outreach and engagement, with innovative partnerships and Extension now serving every county in Colorado. Associate VP for Engagement Kathay Rennels deserves particular credit this year for spearheading an initiative to create engagement hubs that will bring together the powerful resources of the CSU System to effectively support the community and economic development needs of Colorado.
- We've invested in more than \$1.3 billion infrastructure and academic improvements – with new academic buildings, parking facilities, event and athletics facilities, and a new medical center all now under way.
- Our athletics programs made extraordinary progress with a winning percentage of 81 percent in football, men's and women's basketball, and volleyball – the highest winning percentage for the four major sports out of all Division 1 schools.
- We just completed another record fundraising year – tripling private giving to CSU in the last 5 years.
- We've led institution-wide initiatives to improve the climate for women and adjunct faculty at CSU – and this fall we are launching an in-depth focus on affordable housing for CSU employees.

So as we wrestle with our challenges, we also see around us the evidence of excellence.

Indeed, because we excel in our fundamentals, because we understand how to respond to the big challenges we face, we have a responsibility to look beyond our moment and ask what is ahead of us – figuratively, what do we want to study? Who do we want to be? What foundation will we lay for those who will follow us to build upon?

In 5 short years, CSU will celebrate a milestone birthday: 150 years old. The people who were here that 1<sup>st</sup> day at Colorado Agricultural College could not have imagined the great university that would grow from the seeds they planted. And it's likely, given the pace of change, that we cannot imagine CSU a century and ½ from now.

But we can – as they did - tend our plantings. We can lay a foundation that will support change and evolution, even disruption and revolution.

And in that context, I want us all to take a moment to look around at our Oval. This is “the sentimental heart” of our university. Every student who graduates from CSU has a memory of this place. Members of our community gather here for weddings, graduation photos, picnics, shaded by these majestic American elms – some of which date back to 1881.

But in my office, I have early photographs that show a time before these trees were here – when this was essentially a field where they harvested grass hay. Over a century ago, someone stood in this spot and thought to plant a stand of trees – trees they wouldn't live to see in their full height and glory – a gift from one generation to distant generations not yet born.

We have a chance today to leave a similar legacy for those who will stand here on the Oval 150 years from now. We will never see those faces, we won't know their names, we can't even imagine the types of things they will be studying. But we know they will build upon our foundation.

And that means that, for us, time cannot be an indefinite continuum. We need to adopt a sense of urgency because we have important work left to do.

Provost Miranda has been working with the Faculty Council to modify our strategic planning process, including the SPARCS that have characterized our efforts here over recent years. The areas of focus in the planning process will remain essentially unchanged; these are areas that most define us as a university:

- Teaching & learning that is student centric.
- Research and Discovery with a global impact.
- Engagement and outreach that change lives locally and across the world.
- A strong , inclusive campus culture.
- Faculty as our foundation.

- A commitment to be accountable, sustainable, and responsible.

These are the cornerstones of our strategic planning – these are the stars by which we navigate.

But there is more than 1 course we can set by those stars - and I believe that the path we choose to navigate has everything to do with the character and culture of this university.

At CSU, we choose paths marked by excellence – not in some things, but in everything we do.

- We could have set out some recycling bins and called that a commitment to environmental sustainability – but instead, we rose to the challenge set out by our own faculty and staff, dug deep into our practices and policies, and today we are widely regarded as the one of the most sustainable, environmentally friendly universities in the country – the first ever to achieve Platinum status in the STARS rating system.
- Our classrooms would still be full of bright and motivated students if we didn't introduce them to campus with Ram Welcome – but we saw an opportunity to create what might well be the finest freshman orientation experience in the country – and we took it.
- When we needed new residence hall space, we could have slapped together old-school dormitory rooms with little more than beds, closets, and a communal bathroom. Instead, we stepped back to imagine what a true living-learning community could look like, and that was the root of our Academic and Laurel Villages.
- When our military troops began to come home from Iraq and Afghanistan, we could have taken their GI Bill funding, enrolled them in classes and left it at that – but instead we've committed to be the best university in the country in support for our student-veterans, and we've built scholarship programs and support mechanisms to make that happen.
- Our graduation and student success rates were enough in line with national norms that we didn't have to make a decade-long investment in an ambitious student success plan. But we knew we could do better. So we created a whole new set of tools for our faculty, advisors, and students to support better academic planning and improve the depth of student learning. And now, halfway between my original challenge to the university and our 2020 goal, we've raised our first-year persistence rate to 86 percent and our graduation rate to a record high of 67.4 percent; and indeed this number approaches 80% if we include those who transfer and finish elsewhere. But we can still improve: This year, we'll engage in a conversation about how, together, we can eliminate the first-generation gap – setting a national benchmark for others to follow.
- We could have continued to shake our heads at the problem of sexual assault on college campuses, issuing safety warnings and offering support to victims. But instead, thanks to the leadership of our Women and Gender Advocacy team, we decided to REFRAME how we think and talk about interpersonal violence in ways that are profoundly new and meaningful. The REFRAME campaign officially launched this year at Ram Welcome, and I encourage everyone here to learn more about it with the information that volunteers will be handing out during the picnic. To the men who are here today, I say again – and we should not shy away from this point: sexual violence is a male issue, and men can and need to stand up and end it at CSU. Sexual violence has nothing to do with building up,

nothing to do with being a man; it has to do with cowardice and tearing down; it is not the CSU way. So join me in Its on Us, join me in Reframe, join me in standing up and speaking out – let’s end the silent culture that allows this disease to live in the dark places where it hides. Let’s end sexual violence – not someday, not tomorrow – let’s end it now.

At CSU, we have a wonderful history of planting ideas in fertile ground and watching them grow in amazing and unexpected ways. Some we harvest almost immediately while others grow more slowly. It took a century to bring the elms on the Oval to this point. But one day we look back at what we planted, and we see that during that time, there’s been an enormous shift, that patience and determination and hard work have made a lasting and important difference, that the seedlings have now grown beyond our reach and spread their branches in ways we couldn’t imagine.

So today, as we look ahead to CSU’s 150<sup>th</sup> birthday, I am asking us to come together as a campus community to choose the seeds we plant together – whether we will see them grow to mighty elms or not.

Today we launch an initiative called “Re-Envisioning Colorado State.” It’s a thoughtful, collective look at the legacy we wish to leave for those who will hold the privilege of caring for this great academic community when we pass that torch to the next generation of those who cherish Colorado State University and all that she has been, is, and will be.

It’s an initiative that begins with questions.

- Can we envision how to facilitate learning in a new era of technology when the pace of change threatens to spin our heads?
- Can we envision how we discover in an age of big data and even bigger questions?
- Can we envision how we connect to the citizens we exist to serve in an era awash with information, drowning in “communication,” and trying hard to turn down the noise?
  - Can we envision what student services look like to amazingly talented people struggling with mental health issues?
- Can we envision a balance between quality and affordability – making real the promise of access to excellence?

This speech doesn’t provide answers, its not a recipe; it is calls for an assembly of all our ingredients in the kitchen of the collective mind.

I’m asking each of us to look around

- at our campus,
- at our culture,
- at our environment,
- at our practices,
- at our assumptions,
- and think in very real ways about the seeds we should be planting.

I have asked the leadership of our campus governance groups – Faculty Council, Classified Personnel Council, Administrative Professional Council, and ASCSU – to take the lead moving “Re-Envisioning Colorado State” forward. You’ll be seeing this initiative come to life in the coming weeks and months, and I hope we’ll all engage it.

Re-envision. Re-imagine. Re-invent. Then re-prioritize and re-commit.

If we focus on these efforts now, we will be able to celebrate the foundation we leave CSU for her 150<sup>th</sup> birthday.

There is so much to be proud of at our university. She remains – because of each and all of you – focused on the same ideals of advancing knowledge, improving the society in which we live, and changing the lives of the next generation that caused Lincoln to look up from both his desk and the specter of the terrible, bloody, and uncertain future that must surely have haunted him as he signed the Morrill Act on July 2, 1862 – a signature that forever changed the course of human expectations about the right of a mind to soar, and forever forged in the steel of our souls for those of us who serve these universities the commitment and dedication to bettering lives and teaching those minds to fly.

The work that we do is a privilege.

- Look to our past with pride,
- our present with determination,
- and our future with renewed commitment.

To do this work, shoulder to shoulder with all of you, remains my great honor. Thank you, and let’s make it another great year, CSU!