



**BALL STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

Office of the President

**GEOFFREY S. MEARNS  
FALL CONVOCATION  
EMENS AUDITORIUM  
AUGUST 18, 2023  
9:00 A.M.**

Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Dr. Marri. I am grateful for your leadership.

To this year's award recipients, congratulations. Your contributions to our University are profound and enduring. Let's take another moment to express our appreciation to our colleagues for all that they do to advance our mission.

Earlier, Anand introduced our new faculty and the new members of our academic leadership team. I'd now like to introduce a few other new colleagues.

In June, Governor Holcomb appointed the newest member of our Board of Trustees.

Hope Churchill is a junior studying business administration. Hope, I look forward to working with you.

I would also like to welcome several new members of our University's leadership team.

Rashida Willard is our associate vice president for inclusive excellence. She joined us last September from Clark College in Washington.

Darrell Clark is our associate vice president for people and culture. He joined us in January from Pasco-Hernando State College in Florida.

Kelli Huth also joined us in January. After serving as the director for the Center for Civic Engagement at Bingham University in upstate New York, Kelli returned to Ball State as our associate vice president for community engagement.

Margaret Lo is our first sustainability officer. She joined us in March after serving as director of business engagement at the Institute for Market Transformation in Washington, D.C.

Chifundo Biliwata is our Director of Internal Audit. He joined us in March from Eastern Illinois University.

And Jeff Mitchell also joined us in March as our Director of Athletics. He previously served as the deputy AD at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Would you all please stand so that we may welcome you to our University?

These new colleagues demonstrate that we continue to attract outstanding people—from coast to coast and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico.

And to all of you. Thank you for joining us this morning.

This year, I begin my seventh academic year as the president of Ball State University. Today and every day, I am fortunate to have this opportunity.

In May, I sent you a video in which I said that I believe that we have emerged from the pandemic better and stronger.

I said that we are better and stronger because of all of you—our dedicated faculty and staff.

I am grateful for your persistence. Your passion. Your creativity.

This morning, I want to elaborate on why I am so confident that we are stronger. That we are better. And that an even brighter future awaits us.

Let me begin with very good news about enrollment. On Monday, we will enroll approximately 3,800 new freshmen, a nine-percent increase compared to Fall 2022. The size of this year's freshman class is even more impressive when you consider that, in August 2021, we enrolled only 3,278 new freshmen because of the adverse impact of the pandemic.

So, this year's freshman class has increased by 16 percent in just two years. Even though the number of high school graduates in Indiana continues to decline. Even though the percentage of Indiana high school graduates who go to college continues to decline. And even though the number of Indiana high school graduates who choose to go to college outside of Indiana has increased.

In short, our share of Indiana college-going students is now larger than it was before the pandemic.

This year's incoming freshmen are also well prepared. These students earned an average high school GPA of 3.55. Approximately 30 percent are first-generation students, with an all-time high of 1,048 students from underrepresented populations.

This Fall, our Honors College will welcome the largest freshman class in our history—435 students—with an average high school GPA of 4.06. Just two years ago, in 2021, freshman enrollment in the Honors College was 376 students. That's a 16 percent increase in two years.

I am also encouraged by the incremental increase in our Fall-to-Fall retention rate. More than 76 percent of last year's freshmen are enrolled again this year. That's more than a three-percentage point increase compared to the Fall 2020 freshman cohort. That's encouraging, but we have more work to do to increase that rate to more than 80 percent.

And we have much more work to do to improve these outcomes for first-generation students and students from underrepresented populations.

With respect to graduate students, this Fall, we will enroll 8 percent more new students compared to last Fall. Similarly, we anticipate our international enrollment will also increase. We may welcome new students from as many as 30 different countries.

We have many people to thank for these impressive results. But I am particularly grateful to Paula Luff, Chris Munchel, and their team for implementing innovative strategies that have enabled us to recruit new students..

Last year, we adopted the Common App along with our Ball State application. As a result, the number of prospective students who applied to Ball State increased from 22,000 in 2021 to 28,000 in 2023—a 25 percent increase.

As many of you know, we invite our accepted students to celebrate their admission during our annual Admitted Student Day.

This year, on April 14, more than 4,400 prospective students and their families attended Admitted Student Day—the largest number ever.

The energy on campus that day was palpable.

Events like Admitted Student Day are very important, because we know that prospective students are 40 percent more likely to enroll at Ball State if they visit our beautiful campus—and if they get to meet our faculty and staff in person.

One way we are increasing graduate enrollment is through our new partnership with Coursera, a leading online learning platform. Beginning this Fall, Ball State and Coursera will offer online graduate degrees in computer science and data science, programs that allow us to respond to workforce needs in Indiana and across the country.

Paula and her team are important to enrollment. But all of you are instrumental to this process, no matter if you teach, work in financial aid, or serve meals in our dining halls. Sometimes it's just a smile to make a person feel welcome—to convince a prospective student that our campus is where they want to study and live.

Let me tell you about Suzy Smith, the chair of our Department of Media, and a prospective student named Jake, and Jake's mother, Julie.

Julie was impressed that, when one of Suzy's colleagues asked Suzy if she had time to answer Jake's questions about sports journalism, Suzy invited them to her office.

In the email Julie sent about their experience, Julie said: “Suzy took the time to really talk to Jake. When her lunch arrived, she told her assistant it could wait. Then she walked Jake to the Media Center and introduced him to more people. Slowly, I could see Jake’s interest rise. He didn’t feel like another student on a tour. He felt like he was someone who Ball State wanted on campus, as a person, not a number. He was somewhere his talents could be appreciated.”

When Jake and his parents returned for Admitted Student Day, they met again with Suzy. Later that day, Jake told his parents he wanted to buy some Ball State swag—because he was going to become a Cardinal. When Jake begins his classes on Monday, Julie wanted me to know that Suzy Smith “is a major reason why.”

In addition to our colleagues who contribute to our enrollment efforts, I appreciate our colleagues who help more of our students graduate on time.

Last year, about 600 members of the campus community attended our first Student Success Summit. This year’s summit, which takes place on September 20 and 21, will provide another opportunity for us to enhance our strategies for student success as we strive to serve all of our students better than ever before.

Many of you know we are using EAB Navigate to generate data that allow us to develop and implement our student success initiatives.

We have also begun serving students in our new Cardinal Central in the Student Center. It’s a one-stop shop for students to navigate our administrative processes. Already we’ve seen an increase in students visiting the new Cardinal Central, which we will celebrate with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on August 29.

Tools like Navigate and spaces like Cardinal Central—their impact depends on the people who use them. Throughout this past year, I have heard many stories about the impact of faculty and staff who directly serve our students.

This past Spring, when Jordan Grammas, the assistant director of disability services, learned that one of our first-generation students was struggling with health issues and financial hardship, Jordan responded. She helped this student register for academic accommodations. She continually asked this student, “What more can I do to help?”

The personal commitment of our faculty and staff, combined with new strategies, produce impressive outcomes for our students.

One more statistic. Since the advent of the pandemic in March 2020 through our commencement ceremony last month, more than 20,800 students earned a degree from our University.

This statistic demonstrates how, every day, the people at our University show up for our students. That’s how we become better and stronger.

We also show up for each other. That’s also how we become better and stronger.

This past January, as the Spring semester was about to begin, two faculty members in our English department needed to fly halfway around the world to care for an ill family member.

The professors, who are married, took semester-long medical leaves. Their sudden absences required other faculty to cover their six classes.

Sean Lovelace said: “I was overwhelmed by how many different faculty with varying expertise stepped up to cover those classes, with minimal time to prepare. I was truly inspired as chair of English. Not surprised, mind you, but inspired. The department proved itself not just as colleagues, but as a family that helps one another in their time of need.”

I have one more story to share in this regard—a story that demonstrates how our University community shows up for our students, for each other, and for every person who sets foot on campus.

Darrel Graham has been a landscaper at Ball State for more than 20 years. This Summer, Darrel helped update the lawn and the flower beds around the Letterman Building.

As he worked, Darrel was occasionally asked questions from incoming students and their families attending Orientation. They wanted to know more about Letterman and whether any of his work was displayed inside the building.

Darrel didn’t know what to tell them, so he went looking for answers. That’s when he bumped into Dean Paaige Turner. Paaige shared with Darrel a few details about the building and about Letterman for him to pass on to the next curious visitor. Paaige then introduced herself, because Darrel didn’t know who she was—he may be the only person on campus who doesn’t know Paaige Turner—and she thanked him for helping provide a warmer welcome to our visitors.

Darrel, it’s now my turn to thank you. I am grateful for your commitment—to go above and beyond on behalf of our University. You inspire all of us to be better.

To further demonstrate how we are better as a University, let me tell you about some of our awards, recognitions, and accomplishments of the past year.

Last Fall, Professor Shantanu Suman and his students received the 2022 American Graphic Design Award. This award recognized the students’ design of the Storer Woods Neighborhood, a project for which this immersive learning class worked with Building Better Communities and the directors of the Muncie Action Plan.

This past academic year, faculty in our Teachers College received approximately \$7 million in grant funding. That’s significant given that, last year, our University received a total of approximately \$16 million in external sponsored research.

Over the past decade, graduates of our entrepreneurship program in the Miller College of Business have started more than 100 businesses, the majority of which are based here in Indiana. The amount of funding raised by these businesses totals more than \$300 million dollars.

Here's another impressive achievement. In April, Griffin Thomas became the fourteenth Ball State student to receive a Goldwater Scholarship, which is one of the country's most prestigious scholarships for undergraduates pursuing research-focused careers in STEM fields. Griffin is a junior majoring in biology. He transferred to Ball State from Ivy Tech.

That same month, Imani Brissett, a senior in our musical theater program, was named the winner of the Irene Ryan Award at this year's Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. This award is given each year to the best collegiate actor in the country.

Throughout the past year, approximately 300 students delivered care to more than 4,000 community members in the Interprofessional Community Clinics in our College of Health. In partnership with our Healthy Lifestyle Center, our clinics hosted 90 outreach events, delivering health education and screenings to 2,000 people.

In short, we are helping our neighbors to be better and stronger.

And for the seventh consecutive year, our University received a Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award from INSIGHT into Diversity, the oldest and most prominent diversity magazine and website in higher education.

To learn more about our sustained commitment to inclusiveness, please attend our State of Inclusive Excellence Address on September 19 in the Student Center Ballroom.

These are a few examples of how our University is better and stronger at the state and national level. Now let me tell you about another award we received—one that brought our University international recognition.

In April, a team of students from our Estopinal College of Architecture and Planning was named the grand prize winner of the Build Challenge in the United States Department of Energy's Solar Decathlon.

In the final phase of this international competition, our students beat 15 other teams from around the world for their work in designing, planning, and helping to construct the Alley House, a net zero-energy home in Indianapolis.

The Alley House project is one example of how our Office of Immersive Learning has been working to return students' participation in immersive learning courses to their pre-pandemic levels. This past year, our faculty offered 163 sections of immersive learning courses to approximately 2,500 students—almost a thousand more students than last year.

One of this year's award-winning immersive learning courses was led by Professor Katie Lawson from our Department of Psychological Science.

Katie partnered with the Noblesville Fire Department to provide her students with the opportunity to conduct research that could help firefighters identify workplace stressors that adversely affect their health.

At the end of the Spring semester, Katie's students presented their findings to the firefighters, including Adam Biddle, who is the battalion chief. Adam is one of ten Ball State graduates who are employed by the Noblesville Fire Department.

Adam said: "I was ecstatic after my first visit with the class to see how enthusiastic and professional they were approaching the unique challenges facing my great profession. It gives me great faith in this next generation, knowing these are the type of people who represent this University."

Adam wanted us to know he's a proud alumnus—and also the proud father of a Cardinal who starts his freshman year here on Monday.

Adam is one of more than 150,000 Ball State graduates living and working in Indiana—supporting our state's economy and contributing to the vitality of communities all across the state.

One of our immersive learning programs that has emerged as a national leader in preparing our graduates for success is Sports Link.

In June, Faith Denig and Peyton Monnell, recent graduates of CCIM, won a regional Emmy for their documentary, "Thy Will Be Done—The Trey Uetrecht Story." Faith and Peyton created this documentary for SportsLink.

If you haven't seen their documentary, you should watch it. You will be inspired by Trey's story. When he was a freshman at Ball State, football was Trey's life. Until a cold night in February 2019 when Trey was driving back to Muncie from his home in Southwest Ohio.

On that drive, he hit a patch of black ice and wrapped his truck around a tree. Trey was fortunate that he wasn't killed, but he was devastated to learn that he would never play football again.

Trey spent weeks in the hospital. He was in so much pain—his arm and chest mangled by the crash—that, as he explained in the documentary, he wished he were dead. But as he slowly recovered, and as a person of great faith, he came to believe that God had another purpose for his life—a purpose much more important than football.

It's a powerful story. If you watch it, keep some tissues within reach. And what's as remarkable as Trey's recovery and his renewed purpose is that our students were able to communicate the power of that story through the skills they learn and the experiences they have as students at Ball State.

We also strive for—and achieve—excellence in athletic competition.

Last year, our Cardinals won six conference championships, and 11 teams qualified to participate in national postseason competitions.

In May, our Cardinals received the Jacoby Trophy. This award is presented each year by the MAC to the university with the best all-around women's sports programs. And Ball State finished second in the competition for the Reese Trophy, which is presented to the MAC's best men's programs.

On the same evening in May that we received these awards, our student athletes received the Institutional Academic Achievement Award. This award is given each year to the university whose student athletes had the highest combined GPAs across all sports.

So, first for women's sports programs.

Second for men's sports programs.

And first for academic excellence.

No other university has produced these results in the 75-year history of the Mid-American Conference.

Better and stronger—and brighter—than ever before!

When it comes to our student athletes, we have three expectations: athletic performance, academic excellence, and how they represent our University.

Last September, I received an email from Bryan Sumler. Bryan grew up in Tennessee, and he told me that he was a lifelong fan of the Volunteers.

Although our Cardinals lost a football game to Tennessee last September, Bryan wanted me to know that he was impressed by the determination of our players.

He wrote: "Those young men battled hard the entire game ... The way they played, the score didn't matter. They should be called the Spartans because they sure fought like warriors."

Around that same time, I was copied on an email that Nate Jazyk sent to Josh Rife, the head coach of our women's soccer team. Nate is a Ball State graduate and so is his wife, Jennifer. They and their two children had recently attended a match between Ball State and Valparaiso.

After the match, Lexy Smith, one of our players, visited with Nate's 13-year-old daughter, who also plays soccer. Lexy shared tips and encouragement with this young girl.

Nate wrote, "Lexy even exchanged cell numbers with my daughter after taking a few selfies and encouraged her to reach out. Lexy personified the meaning of Beneficence. This is what Ball State is about."

This past year was indeed an outstanding one for our Cardinals. The best year in our University's history.



I want to take a moment, though, to recognize an extraordinary student athlete who excelled in the most important sport on any college campus—track and field.

On June 10, Charity Griffith won the high jump at the NCAA outdoor championships. It was Ball State's first national championship since 1999.

I want to show you this 30-second video of Charity's winning jump—she cleared a bar that was set at six feet, four inches high.

What a remarkable leap!

Anand, now, I know you're a former college football player. And you won this year's Deans' Shootout. So I thought you could inspire our colleagues—or perhaps entertain us. We're going to bring out the equipment to see if you can match Charity's extraordinary feat.

Permit me to share an update about the latest enhancements to our campus.

We recently finished the last phase of our East Mall Project, which connects this pathway from the Village to the Gora Recreation Center.

We're in the final year of the renovation of the Cooper Science Building. Some classrooms in the renovated portion of the building will be available this Fall. Then, the demolition of the east end will be finished by next Summer.

Our new Peace Plaza, which is located between our Architecture Building and the Whiting Building, will be completed in October.

Starting next week, students can take advantage of a new gathering space on campus. LaFollette Grove features seating made from limestone slabs recycled from the LaFollette Complex. The words etched into the seats recognize the faculty and staff whose names graced the nine halls of the complex. And this Fall, visitors to our Multicultural Center will have access to a new rooftop terrace that will be ideal for hosting outdoor events and for enjoying concerts at our new Brown Family Amphitheater.

I invite all of you to mark your calendars for September 19, when we will hold a ribbon-cutting ceremony at this new venue. After the ceremony, there will be a performance by our jazz ensemble and Tatum Langley, who graduated from Ball State in 2021.

As many of you know, the Brown Family Amphitheater is named in honor of Charlie Brown, a Ball State graduate who provided the lead gift for the amphitheater.

Charlie has insisted that his gifts enrich the lives of our faculty, staff, and students—and also our community. His passion aligns with our commitment to serving our friends and neighbors.

Now I want to show you how our new amphitheater fits into our plans for The Village.

As many of you are aware, we will build a new Performing Arts

Center as the catalytic agent for our plan to revitalize The Village. In June, our Board of Trustees authorized me to execute an agreement with Fairmount Properties, our development partner. Based on our commitment to construct the Performing Arts Center, Fairmount and a hotel operator will invest more than \$80 million into various projects in The Village. There will be a new select-service hotel, an innovation center, restaurants, shops, apartments, and owner-occupied homes and townhomes.

The reason that arts and culture is the theme for The Village is because we already have an extraordinary collection of diverse arts and culture venues immediately adjacent to The Village: Emens Auditorium, Pruis Hall, Sursa Hall, the new Brown Family Amphitheater, the David Owsley Museum of Art, the Brown Planetarium, the Rinard Greenhouse, and the Glick Center for Glass.

These facilities—both the ones we enjoy now and the Performing Arts Center—are the tangible demonstration of how we will be better and stronger by enhancing the quality of life for people in our community.

Another way in which we serve our community—in which we demonstrate our commitment to our enduring value of social responsibility—is our partnership with Muncie Community Schools.

Since the partnership began, we have made good progress in achieving our collective goal: student enrollment at MCS has stabilized; budgets have been balanced annually; and compensation for teachers and staff has increased by more than 30 percent.

This December, the MCS school board will make the final payment on the \$10 million bond that triggered state oversight of the school district in 2017.

This final payment is a symbol of our progress. It's progress for all children and families in Muncie. It's a clear sign of hope—that there is a brighter future ahead.

Our historic partnership with MCS was the product of legislation passed by the General Assembly and signed by Governor Holcomb in 2018. And the good work that the MCS board and the administration are doing is helping to enhance our University's credibility with elected officials in Indianapolis.

Earlier this year, we learned that, as a result of the new biennial budget they approved, our University will receive the largest increases in our annual operating appropriation in more than a decade.

And the state budget includes more than \$81 million to enable us to renovate and restore several academic buildings on our campus. We are grateful for the State's investment.

We are also very fortunate that, in addition to more financial support from the state, we continue to generate significant philanthropic support because of the partnership between our university and our colleagues in the Foundation.

For the fifth consecutive year, our University raised more than \$30 million in new philanthropic gifts and commitments.

This past year, we raised more than \$58 million—an all-time record. A 200 percent increase from just a few years ago.

And again this year, on One Ball State Day, we raised more than \$1 million in 24 hours to support our students and our outstanding programs.

This chart illustrates the upward trajectory of our recent fundraising success. It's the quantifiable manifestation of the pride—and the gratitude—that our graduates have for Ball State and the passion that they and our benefactors have for our mission.

You may have noticed me weaving our enduring values into the stories that I've shared with you this morning—stories that demonstrate to you how we are better and stronger.

Many of you know that, at Ball State, we define gratitude—one of those values—as our commitment to expressing our appreciation and to demonstrating our appreciation through our actions.

Let me tell you about two graduates who have demonstrated their gratitude by making gifts to our University.

First, I want to tell you about a graduate whose Chinese name was Bo. For many years, Bo has preferred to be called Paul.

Paul first arrived on our campus in 1987. Before he came to Ball State, Paul had been a high school dropout in China. But he passed the exam that enabled him to enroll in a university in China where he obtained his bachelor's degree.

He then discovered Ball State in a book he found in a library. After submitting his application to our graduate school, he was accepted and told that he would receive a graduate assistantship.

When Paul arrived in Muncie, his housing was not ready. So, he slept for a few weeks in the supply closet of the Chinese restaurant where he worked. One evening, he went to deliver food at an apartment. Through the window, he saw two of his professors.

Paul turned around without giving them their food. He returned to the restaurant, and he explained to the owner that he could no longer work there. Paul was concerned that his professors would think that he wasn't taking his graduate assistantship seriously enough if they saw he was working as a delivery man.

Soon after, Paul began working in our computer services center.

And because of the mentorship of a Ball State professor, Paul was prepared for his first job. He went on to a successful career that included promotions and performance bonuses.

In 2020, Paul retired after 30 years working for the same company.

After he retired, Paul decided to make a donation to Ball State in order to demonstrate his gratitude to his mentor and to our University. Paul donated \$1 million—because he believes that Ball State enabled him to achieve “the American dream.”

The other graduate made a smaller gift. But the motivation for his gift is just as meaningful.

In April, on One Ball State Day, the Foundation received a handwritten letter from Nile Harper.

Inside the letter was a check for \$500. Nile wrote that he and his wife, Judith, both graduated from Teachers College in 1953—70 years ago.

Nile also shared how Ball State prepared them for their fulfilling careers. Judith was an educator who became executive director of financial aid at the University of Michigan, and Nile was a minister who earned his doctorate from Columbia University.

According to the letter, Nile and Judith were married in 1955. They raised “two great sons who achieved success in business administration and the international food industry.”

In the last paragraph, Nile wrote: “Much of the meaningful accomplishments of our family have roots in the skills and values we learned at Ball State. We celebrated our 65th wedding anniversary three years ago. Now, Judith is deceased. So our gift is a good memorial in honor of her life accomplishments. Thank you, Ball State.”

Nile’s letter helped me to appreciate an important point. Last year, we received approximately 37,100 gifts. Each one of these gifts is a demonstration of someone’s gratitude for the positive impact that our faculty and staff have had on their lives and their families.

Each day, we are planting and nurturing seeds of Beneficence—seeds that will one day blossom into acts of service, kindness, and generosity.

We are very fortunate to create this legacy.

I just mentioned gratitude. I incorporated many of our enduring values into my remarks this morning, because I believe that our sustained commitment to these values enabled us to overcome the challenges of the pandemic and emerge better and stronger.

We presently face many challenges.

We have to determine how to meet the evolving needs and expectations of students in the 21st century.

We must educate the people who doubt the value of a college degree and respond to those people who unfairly criticize the culture on college campuses.

We must also support colleagues who are still recovering from the stress and fatigue caused by the pandemic.

And, of course, the pandemic taught us one very important lesson—there may be other formidable challenges that we cannot anticipate. We should be humble when trying to predict the future.

To meet the present and future challenges, I believe that we must continue to embrace our enduring values.

I also believe that we must enhance our commitment to you—to all of our faculty and staff.

Our fundamental mission is to empower our graduates to have fulfilling careers and to lead meaningful lives. To fulfill this mission to our students, we must ensure that our faculty and staff find fulfillment in their work—and perhaps enable them to find greater meaning in their lives through this work.

We embark on this commitment to “People and Culture” on a strong foundation.

A few months ago, Forbes released its rankings of the best employers in the country. The rankings were based solely on surveys of employees.

Ball State was ranked as the fourth best mid-sized employer in the state of Indiana. We were the only college or university in the state to even be ranked by Forbes.

This work can also be guided by the experience of our graduates.

I recently listened to a podcast hosted by Don Yaeger. Don is the Ball State graduate who spoke at our commencement in December 2022. In that episode, he interviewed Angela Ahrendts, another very successful Ball State graduate.

Angela was the CEO of Burberry before she was hired as the senior vice president at Apple. Angela told Don that, wherever she worked, she never focused on P&L—profit and loss—but rather on her company’s P&I—“people and impact.”

Angela explained that at the intersection of an organization’s purpose and impact is where your colleagues find professional fulfillment.

This insight is from a business leader whose overriding objective was to sell designer clothes and iPhones.

I’ve also been reading some articles about the changes in our Nation’s workforce.

One of the articles discussed how companies and organizations can attract and retain employees in the wake of the pandemic.

One approach is to implement an employee value system comprised of four interrelated factors. Two of those factors—material offerings and opportunities to develop and grow—are given on an individual basis. The other two—connection and community and meaning and purpose—they are experienced on a collective level.

I know that some of our colleagues want to work remotely. But this same article cited research that demonstrated that remote work comes at a cost—not necessarily to the employer, but to the individual.

In a survey of 500 college graduates, 75 percent of them said that, if they worked remotely, they would miss mentoring and community.

Another study found that employees at Microsoft discovered that remote reduced collaboration.

I know that some tasks can be completed remotely. And we will continue to use technology to inform our flexible work policy.

But I believe that, for the vast majority of our faculty and staff, working completely remotely is not beneficial for them. It impedes creative collaboration. It undermines collegiality. It inhibits mentorship. And, perhaps most importantly, it prevents someone from having the kind of meaningful, personal engagement that increases professional fulfillment.

So, I ask you and your colleagues—be thoughtful about when to work away from campus. Use remote technology strategically. Be present in the classroom for your students. Be present on campus with your colleagues. Do it for them. And for yourself.

We value our university culture. Let us sustain that culture, so that all of us can find fulfillment—together.

In March, I attended a lecture in the Estopinal College of Architecture and Planning.

This program was the inaugural Ethan Whitehead Guest Lecture in Sustainability. The featured speaker was Billy Fleming, an expert in sustainability.

Before Mr. Fleming's lecture, Julie Whitehead spoke. In a moment, I'll share some of what Julie said. First, let me tell you about Julie's son, Ethan, and three of his classmates.

Ethan was a student in CAP. He had a passion for sustainability. He dreamed of becoming an architect.

On November 11, 2021, Ethan collapsed during a class. He died that day as a result of an undiagnosed medical condition.

In the days that followed, Ethan's professors and his classmates grieved.

Then one of Ethan's classmates, Alec Meister, found a way to cope with this loss. Alec decided that he would finish Ethan's final class project. Two other CAP students volunteered to help Alec.

Emma Wynn said, "In our architecture program, we are a family."

Josh Hoff said, "Whenever Ethan came into class, he had this sense of joy. He'd fill everyone's heart with that joy as well. He had a feeling of just wanting to be there every day."

For their final project, Ethan and the other students had to design a new use for an old storefront. Ethan's concept was a micro-distillery with unique elements, including a "living wall" made from live plants. To complete his project, Ethan's three classmates reviewed his notes and his social media posts. They successfully completed Ethan's project. They titled it, "He Flies."

In December 2021, a month after Ethan died, these three students presented Ethan's project to their faculty and their classmates. Dean Ferguson invited Ethan's parents, Julie and Doug, to attend their presentation.

Julie and Doug were moved by what they learned about their son that day.

After seeing the presentation, Julie said, "Our son loved Ball State so much. Now we know why. This campus is a community, like a small town. It's that small town attitude that 'your kid matters here. You matter here.'"

Julie added, "Ethan Garner Whitehead belonged in CAP. He belonged at Ball State. He found his place where he fit in. My prayers were answered."

A few months later, Julie and Doug decided to demonstrate their gratitude by making a gift to our University. Their philanthropy will provide emergency financial support for students and support the sustainability lecture.

Doug explained why he and his wife made their unsolicited gift. He said, "This is a way for Ethan to still be able to touch lives."

Julie said, "If we can take our pain and do something to improve the world in the name of someone whom we miss, then we want to do that. It helps us heal by giving this gift to the University. It's the balm that coats the wound."

Julie's remarks at the lecture in March were very powerful. Her final words particularly resonated with me, and they will help me communicate an important message that I hope will also resonate with you.

In her final comments, Julie shared her last telephone conversation with Ethan.

She said, "It was a Saturday night, and I remember he called me and said he had gone to listen to a famous jazz trombonist who was performing at your University. And he was so excited. So all of you who are students, appreciate where you are going to college."

I believe that, if Julie were here with us this morning, if she were standing at this podium, she would also have a message for all of us. She would tell us to appreciate the professional opportunities that we have. To be grateful that we are able to serve others at Ball State University.

I want to take a moment to tell you why I feel so fortunate to be a part of this special university community.

After graduating from law school, as some of you know, I was a trial lawyer for more than 15 years. First, as a federal prosecutor in the Justice Department in

New York City, and then in private practice at a large, international law firm in Cleveland.

I loved being a trial lawyer.

Then, in Fall 2004, I was contacted by a faculty member in the law school at Cleveland State University. She was serving on the search committee for the next dean, and she told me that I had been recommended as a potential candidate by a federal judge in Cleveland.

After some reflection, I decided to submit an application. I thought that, in the very unlikely event that I were selected, it would improve my chances of achieving my professional dream—to be appointed by the President of the United States as a federal judge.

I was interviewed by the search committee as a semi-finalist, but I was not selected as a finalist to interview on campus. I learned that I had been rejected—by reading the names of the five finalists in the newspaper.

A few days later, though, I received a call from the chair of the search committee. This professor told me that two of the finalists had decided to withdraw from the search process, and she invited me to come to campus as a finalist.

As you can imagine, my initial reaction was to decline—politely.

But after a couple days, I decided that it might be a good learning experience for me. So, I accepted the invitation.

A few weeks after my interviews, the president of the university called me. He told me that, with the full support of the faculty—the same people who initially didn't even think I should be invited to campus—he had decided to appoint me as the next dean of the law school.

I accepted the offer, and I committed myself to the work. But, privately I knew that, in a few years, I would return to be a lawyer or, perhaps, a judge.

But that didn't happen.

Because four years later, that president retired, and then the university's board appointed a new president. And a few months after the new president arrived on campus, he called me to his office on a Friday afternoon. As I walked across campus to his office, I called Jennifer. I told her that I thought that the new president was going to hasten my return to the practice of law.

Instead, he asked me to serve as the interim provost. My initial reaction was to decline, because no sane person—sorry, Anand—no sane person actually wants to be a provost.

But two weeks later, I told him that I would serve. And it was a great decision. And here's why.

As I shared with some of you at our leadership retreat in May, I had an experience at my first commencement as interim provost that changed my life—both professionally and personally.



The theme of our May retreat was “commencement,” and people from each table were invited to share a memorable experience from a commencement that they had attended.

I told them about what happened to me during my first commencement as the interim provost of Cleveland State University.

I was sitting onstage. I had fulfilled my ceremonial duties introducing the platform party and the speakers.

About 45 minutes into the parade of graduates, I saw a petite, elderly Black woman about to walk across the platform to receive her diploma. She was at least 70 years old.

When her name was called, she walked slowly across the platform. There were tears streaming down her face.

I don't recall this woman's name.

I don't recall what degree she earned.

But in that moment, I knew this:

She had a dream—a lifelong dream to earn a college degree.

I knew that she had overcome many obstacles to achieve that dream.

And I knew that the faculty and staff at Cleveland State had helped her to overcome those obstacles and to help make her dream come true.

When I reflected on that moment, I came to realize that, if I were given the opportunity to continue serving in higher education, I was not going to return to be a lawyer.

Because of that experience, I came to appreciate that this work is so profoundly rewarding. We transform people's lives—for the better. We make their dreams come true.

Each day, I experience great fulfillment in our mission.

And serving with you brings greater meaning to my life.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

And thank you for listening to me this morning.

Now, we will conclude our program with a tradition that I started in 2017.

As most of you know, each year before this convocation, I call Bill Jenkins, and I ask him to arrange for some students to sing a song that I have selected.

Each year, Bill has assembled students to perform for us. But he's never had them perform the song that I selected. Instead, Bill and Michael Rafter always choose a different song. Bill, I give up!

I decided not to provide a specific request. Instead, Gail Werner and I simply told Bill about my main themes. And, once again, he and Michael selected the song.

Please welcome to the stage a talented group of theatre students to perform a medley, which was arranged by Michael Rafter, with Johnna Tavianini as music director and pianist.

Enjoy!