



**BALL STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Office of the President

**GEOFFREY S. MEARNS
FALL CONVOCATION
EMENS AUDITORIUM
AUGUST 19, 2022
9:00 A.M.**

Good morning, everyone. I have the good fortune to serve as your president and to have the opportunity to talk with you this morning.

How about that video? Please join me in thanking Domenic Centofanti, Stacey Grosh, and their colleagues from Marketing and Communications for producing that great video.

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—and our admiration—to our colleagues for all that they do to advance the mission of our University.

In her introductory remarks, Susana welcomed our newest faculty members. I will speak more about this group later. Let me also introduce a few special guests.

First, I want to recognize the members of our Board of Trustees, our Foundation Board of Directors, and our Alumni Council, some of whom are here and some of whom are watching via our livestream.

We are fortunate that several elected officials and their representatives have accepted my invitation to join us this morning, including Muncie Mayor Dan Ridenour.

And to all of you—our faculty, staff, students, and friends, including those watching online—thank you for joining us this morning.

Five years ago, on August 18, 2017, I stood on this stage at this podium to deliver my first Fall Convocation address. During my remarks, I shared with you my initial impressions of our University—the impressions that I had gathered

during my first three months as your president. I described how we were emerging from what I called a “protracted transition in leadership”—a transition that many of you felt had disrupted the progress of this institution.

My goal that morning was to demonstrate to you that, notwithstanding this protracted transition in leadership, our University was strong—and getting stronger.

To prove my fundamental point, I provided several examples of how our impact could be quantified through facts and statistics that I shared about our enrollment and our programs. I also spoke about how, in becoming familiar with our campus, I could literally see the growth and transformation of our facilities. And I relayed how, in conversations with our students, their families, and our graduates, I could hear and feel the pride they have for our University.

After that convocation, several people told me that my message had resonated with them. And some of you shared your appreciation for having returned your focus to our sustained success, and not on a temporary distraction. That was gratifying, because I genuinely believed that my initial impressions were accurate ones.

Today, we are emerging from another disruption—the extraordinary challenge of a global pandemic.

Now, of course, these disruptions are different in many respects.

But there is one similarity: We didn’t simply endure the challenge. We have emerged from the challenge stronger than ever before.

In short, what was true in August 2017 remains true today: No matter the obstacle, we can quantify our impact, we can see the transformative progress we have made, and we can feel what makes our University so distinctive—a culture which makes us all so proud.

Allow me to explain.

First, let me start with some good news. Last year, Fall 2021, we enrolled approximately 3,250 new freshmen. On Monday, we will enroll approximately 3,500 new freshmen—an eight percent increase over last year. I am grateful to Paula Luff and her team for adapting to the challenges posed by the pandemic and helping us to attract more new students to our University.

I also want to recognize several of our colleges that have contributed to our efforts to enroll and retain more students.

Approximately 950 undergraduate students were enrolled in our Estopinal College of Architecture and Planning in 2021. That’s more than double the number of students enrolled in ECAP in 2014.

Over that same period, enrollment in our Teachers College has increased 45 percent—from approximately 3,300 students in 2014 to more than 4,800 students today.

And this year's incoming class of 415 new students in our Honors College is 10 percent more than last year's incoming class.

I am grateful to all of our colleges for working with Paula's team to enhance our enrollment recruitment initiatives.

For example, I want to recognize our College of Sciences and Humanities for creating a new concentration within our cutting-edge Data Analytics program. This new concentration in media analytics was developed through an interdisciplinary partnership with our College of Communication, Information, and Media.

Another way to quantify our impact—and another way in which we recruit new students—is awards, recognitions, and research funding.

Our online MBA program, our online nursing program, and several online graduate programs offered in TC—they've all earned top national rankings from U.S. News & World Report.

Our School of Art was named a Top Design School by Graphic Design USA magazine, and our bachelor's in animation was named one of the Top 50 animation programs in the country.

The Broadcast Education Association ranked CCIM seventh out of more than 100 institutions nationwide in its inaugural Recognition of Institutional Excellence in Media program. CCIM also placed seventh for "Top Winning Documentary Programs" and second in the country—second in the country—for "Top Winning Sports Broadcasting Programs," ahead of Notre Dame and IU.

CCIM students who participate in our media programs won more than 100 awards from a dozen different national, state, and regional organizations. Our online master's degree in information and communication sciences was named No. 1 in the country for debt-income ratio by The Wall Street Journal. And our speech team is now the first team in the state to win 12 consecutive championships.

Our Human Performance Lab in our College of Health has a long history of research in the field of applied exercise physiology. Last year, faculty in HPL received continued funding for a national research project in partnership with several other universities all across the country. This project is designed to discover how exercise changes the body on a genetic level. In total, HPL has received approximately \$10.8 million in funding for this line of research. That's a very large number.

Just a few weeks ago, David Roof, an associate professor in TC, and Dean Marri were awarded \$1.3 million from the United States Department of Education. This grant will enable them to develop an innovative approach to professional development for teachers to promote student learning in American civics, history, and geography, as well as media literacy.

And on Wednesday afternoon, Dean Mari shared with me that Lisa Rubenstein, another professor in TC, was awarded \$2.6 million from the DOE to facilitate an inclusive approach to identifying and supporting gifted students with disabilities.

That's impressive, right? What's also impressive is that Lisa isn't the only member of her household generating federal funding.

Lisa's husband, Eric Rubenstein, is a professor in our biology department. Eric recently received a grant of \$450,000 from the NIH to study microscopic channels in cells where protein molecules travel more efficiently. This research will help improve treatments for people with a variety of chronic ailments, including diabetes.

This funding will enable Eric to extend a ten-year practice of including undergraduate students in his research. This practice is a distinctive feature of the learning partnership among our faculty and our undergraduate students—a learning partnership that inspires and empowers these students to do remarkable things after they graduate.

I'll give you just one example.

Kyle Jones graduated from Ball State in 2019 with a degree in physics. Kyle is now enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University of Texas. In June, Kyle flew to Geneva, Switzerland, where, as part of his Ph.D. program, he's a research assistant at CERN, one of the world's largest and most prestigious centers for scientific research.

Kyle was the only student in his Ph.D. cohort to pass the quantum mechanics qualification exam before starting the program. And Kyle credits the undergraduate research that he participated in here at Ball State.

I'm sure that's true. But I also suspect that Kyle is pretty smart.

Let me tell you about another group of smart students. As you know, as a former college athlete, I regularly celebrate the success of our student-athletes on the court and on the field, including our men's volleyball team, which finished third in the country in the Spring.

But what makes me particularly proud of our Cardinals is how they excel in the classroom. This chart illustrates their commitment to academic success and the progress they've made over the last few years, notwithstanding the extraordinary challenges presented by the pandemic.

As you can see, the collective GPA of all of our teams combined has increased from about 3.0 in 2014 to approximately 3.4 this past year. That's quite impressive.

The academic excellence of all of our students is supported by many people, especially our outstanding faculty.

Last Spring, some of our most experienced full-time faculty chose to participate in our Voluntary Early Retirement Incentive Program—92 full-time faculty members, to be exact.

I understand that some of you wonder how—or even whether—we will replace this expertise. I will share two statistics in response to this concern.

First, on Monday, 81 new full-time faculty will join our University. These new colleagues have excellent educational credentials from outstanding institutions all across the country and all around the world, including several of whom earned their degrees right here at Ball State.

Second, based on the recommendations from the academic deans, the provost and I have already authorized 77 searches to be conducted this academic year for full-time faculty who will join us in Fall 2023.

I hope that these statistics will demonstrate that our deans, our provost, and I—we are all committed to recruiting and retaining our “Faculty of the Future.”

In keeping with the distinctive culture of our University, our newest faculty colleagues and the ones we hire for next year—all of them will embrace our commitment to community-engaged teaching, scholarship, and creative activity—a commitment that is articulated in our mission and in our strategic plan.

At the core of our commitment to community engagement is immersive learning. This past year, approximately 2,000 students participated in 165 immersive learning projects that were offered across 25 academic departments.

Our community engagement efforts also make a difference in the lives of our friends and neighbors.

Last year, graduate students from our College of Health provided services to more than 2,000 patients who visited our Interprofessional Community Clinics. Students in the college also helped combat the pandemic by administering more than 3,700 COVID vaccinations.

Arts and culture are another important way to engage with our neighbors. This past year, as the pandemic abated, we were able to offer many more of these opportunities again in person.

In June 2021, our Brown Planetarium reopened to the public. In only ten months, more than 10,000 visitors attended 300 different programs. Last year, more than 11,000 people visited our David Owsley Museum of Art, including 45 groups of children from 22 schools across the region.

As a community-engaged institution, we value our relationships with our community partners. And one of our most visible—and valued—partnerships is our University’s partnership with Muncie Community Schools.

Four months before I stood on this stage for the first time, the state had assumed control of MCS’s finances. Four months later, the state took full control of both the finances and the academics at MCS.

After this decision was made in December 2017, our University embraced the opportunity to offer our expertise and our innovative academic programs to our local school district, which was in serious distress. And so, in May 2018, the Indiana General Assembly approved legislation that provided us with the responsibility of appointing a new school board to oversee MCS.

Today, a little more than four years since that legislation was signed by Governor Holcomb, I am proud to share with you some of the statistics that demonstrate the progress and great potential of this innovative—and historic—partnership.

MCS has stabilized student enrollment. MCS has balanced its operating budget, with annual revenues exceeding expenditures for every year of the partnership. And the new MCS board and administration have increased compensation for its outstanding teachers and staff every year since our partnership began in 2018. Prior to 2018, MCS teachers and staff had not had a raise in 10 years—10 years!

And this year, the starting salary for new teachers at MCS will be equivalent to what a “master teacher” at MCS earned in 2017.

These positive outcomes are the product of the outstanding leadership of Lee Ann Kwiatkowski, the CEO of Muncie Community Schools, and the dedicated service of the seven-member board that governs the school district. Dr. K is here today, along with three members of the MCS Board of Trustees: Mark Ervin, WaTasha Barnes Griffin, and Jim Lowe.

In May, our Board of Trustees and I reappointed WaTasha and three other current board members. This decision allows the composition of the board to remain the same as it was when the partnership began in 2018. Because these women and men have made significant contributions to the transformation of MCS, they deserve this opportunity to continue working to build a bright future for the children of Muncie.

I’d like to ask Dr. K and the members of the board here today to please stand so we can express our appreciation for their dedication to our community—and the children of Muncie.

The good work at MCS is getting the attention we deserve.

In May, the school district became one of just eight districts statewide to receive a Next Generation School Improvement Grant from the Indiana Department of Education. During this competitive grant cycle, the DOE awarded a total of \$16 million across the state. Of that total, the DOE awarded \$8.1 million to MCS!

This new grant will allow MCS to partner with other education experts over the next four years to improve student performance in several ways, including kindergarten preparedness, third grade reading and math, and student attendance.

The opportunities provided by this grant demonstrate the confidence that other people have in our partnership with MCS. This statistic also reflects the capacity of our partnership to generate external funding that will bring transformational change to our local public school system.

Even closer to home, let me tell you about our own fundraising success.

For the fourth consecutive year, our University raised more than \$30 million in new philanthropic gifts and commitments. Prior to this streak, we had never generated more than \$30 million in two consecutive years.

This past year, we received approximately \$44.9 million in new gifts and commitments. That's an all-time record in the 104-year history of our institution.

This chart illustrates the upward trajectory of our recent fundraising success. It's the quantifiable manifestation of the pride—and gratitude—our alumni have for their alma mater and their abiding passion for our University's mission.

It's also the product of the work that our foundation staff does every day, in partnership with so many of you, to secure—to inspire—these philanthropic investments. Thank you. To all of our benefactors, thank you very much.

Now, I want to share one final statistic that demonstrates the extraordinary impact of your hard work. Since the advent of the pandemic in March 2020 through our July 2022 commencement exercises, we have conferred—our students have earned—more than 15,600 degrees and credentials. 15,600!

This number is a testament to the persistence and tenacity of our students.

And this number is a testament to the dedication of our faculty and staff.

I know that the past two years have been difficult ones—professionally and personally. But this statistic demonstrates that your sustained service is truly worthwhile. Indeed, it's the ultimate way in which we measure our success. And we have excelled. Thank you very much.

Now, permit me to share some examples of how you can see the progress we have made during the pandemic.

As many of you know, our East Quad is the home of our Health Professions Building, which was completed in 2019, and our new Foundational Sciences Building, which was completed in Summer 2021. The Foundational Sciences Building houses our biology and chemistry departments.

The spacious laboratories and the aquatics suite inside this state-of-the-art building are another tangible demonstration of our commitment to research that engages our students—particularly our undergraduate students.

The third phase of our STEM expansion project is the renovation of our Cooper Science Building.

I anticipate that the work on this building will be completed in Spring 2024. At the southern terminus of our East Mall is a new campus landmark that is a manifestation of the generosity of our donors—the new Alderdice Gates.

These gates welcome people to our vibrant campus, forming an attractive new entrance that leads north along our East Mall, past our East Quad, and across Riverside Avenue to our new Multicultural Center, which opened last Summer.

Immediately to the east of this new building, we are presently constructing our Brown Family Amphitheater.

Next Spring, after this beautiful venue is completed, we will be able to bring our campus and our community together to enjoy concerts, theater productions, and musical performances. This facility is another tangible demonstration of the transformational impact of philanthropy.

Speaking of philanthropy, last Summer we also completed the construction of our new Scheumann Family Indoor Practice Facility.

This facility is used by our football, soccer, softball, and baseball teams, as well as our outstanding marching band—the Pride of Mid-America Marching Band.

And speaking of competitive sports, many of you know that esports is an industry that's turned online video games into a spectator sport. But did you know that approximately 85 million people in America watch esports every year? Eighty-five million people!

Our colleagues in CCIM have created an esports ecosystem that includes our new varsity esports teams, the construction of our Esports, and the development of an interdisciplinary esports curriculum.

Just a few weeks ago, CCIM announced a new partnership with Gen.G.

Gen. G is one of the world's largest esports companies, with offices in Los Angeles, Seoul, and Shanghai. Gen. G is also the first company to invest in esports education. This coming year, five student-athletes from Gen.G's Esports Academy will attend our University, learning and competing alongside hundreds of Ball State students who participate in our esports club and play for our varsity team.

These five new students are from South Korea. And they will join Ar Muhammad Aleef, who is from Singapore, and Rhett Crain, who is from Noblesville, Indiana.

Ar and Rhett are the first recipients of our Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing Scholarship, which is a key element of the partnership our University formed with Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing earlier this year.

As you know, David Letterman became famous as a late-night talk show host. But he also co-owns an IndyCar racing team. Now we know that Dave believes competitive gaming is the future.

When he visited campus in February for the announcement, Dave said: “To have these two organizations—RLL and Ball State—meet together in what I fully believe is pioneering a new world, a new culture, a new way of life for not only sports, but any other endeavor—I am so pleased and proud of this association.”

I am grateful that Dave continues to engage with and invest in our students. And, like Dave, I am proud of the innovative programs that our faculty and staff develop in order to prepare our students for the future.

If you travel off campus, you can also see the impact of our University.

For example, in Elevator Hill on the near east side of Indianapolis, several of our colleges are offering educational programs at a location that used to be the corporate headquarters of Angie’s List.

In Fort Wayne, ECAP is participating in a remarkable restoration of several buildings that used to comprise one of the largest General Electric manufacturing facilities in the world.

In this new mixed-use innovation district, called Electric Works, ECAP will partner with local design firms, all headed by ECAP graduates, to develop projects that provide valuable, professional experience for our students.

Beyond the borders of our state, you can also see the impact of our students and our graduates on the national stage—literally on national stages.

For example, last March, our Jazz Ensemble performed at the famed Dizzy’s Club in Lincoln Center in New York City.

A few weeks earlier, Jennifer and I were in New York to see Kayla Davion, who is a 2017 graduate of our musical theatre program. We saw her star as Tina Turner in the Broadway musical about the legendary singer.

Closer to campus, indeed much closer to campus, let’s talk for just a moment about another new performance venue.

As you know, our plan to revitalize The Village includes constructing a new performing arts center. This performing arts center will serve as a catalytic anchor for the revitalization of that commercial district.

This project is also a tangible demonstration of our commitment to the students who participate in our outstanding musical theatre program. And, in 2025, if you stand on the corner of McKinley and University Avenues, this is what you’ll see.

But early tomorrow morning, if you stand on the corner of McKinley and Riverside Avenues, you will see me—and Cadi, too—demonstrate our University’s commitment to another group of students. Because tomorrow morning, around 7:30, Cadi and I will be running through campus with our ROTC cadets.

This run is an annual tradition. And I choose to participate in this run as a tangible demonstration of our University’s long-standing commitment to honor our students who have chosen to serve us—and to protect our freedom.

Every year since 2009, Ball State has been named “Military Friendly” by GI Jobs/Victory Media. This designation is meaningful, because it’s based on input from veterans like Ryan Mahoney.

In April, I received an email from Ryan’s wife, Mary Konkle, who is a chemistry professor. Mary wanted me to know that she is proud of her husband for graduating this Spring from our University at the age of 44.

Mary told me that Ryan had enlisted in the Army after graduating from high school. After finishing his commitment, Ryan was diagnosed with cancer, and the accompanying medical debts delayed his education. But Ryan persevered, and he earned his associate’s degree through courses he took at community colleges in Texas and Tennessee.

But while Mary was teaching at a university in Illinois, there was no clear path at that institution for Ryan to earn his bachelor’s degree.

That changed, though, when Mary began teaching at Ball State. The help Ryan received from our advisors, coupled with the benefits of our tuition remission program, empowered him to complete his undergraduate degree. Mary wrote, “Ball State, as an institution, made his dream doable. Thank you for that.”

Mary, thank you for sharing this story with me. And Ryan, congratulations—and thank you for your service.

A moment ago, I mentioned our ROTC cadets. This past year, we commissioned five of our graduating students at our annual May Commencement.

These women and men became second lieutenants in the U.S. Army at the same time that they joined their classmates in celebrating their academic achievements on the Quad.

What began as a rainy, blustery day culminated in sunshine and smiles.

There was one student, though, who should have been among the graduates, but who wasn’t with us that day. His name is Zak Malitz.

Last August, Zak passed away. He was just 32 years old, a nontraditional student who’d found his purpose studying economics in our Miller College of Business.

Zak’s death devastated his mother, Deb. Her grief was compounded when family and friends asked if they could direct gifts in Zak’s honor to the scholarship established in his father’s name, but Deb had no answer to their question.

Zak’s father, Roger Malitz, was a cellist who taught in our School of Music before his own death 20 years ago, when Zak was just a young boy.

In the months that followed Zak’s death, Deb spoke several times with Brian Meekin, one of the fundraisers in our Foundation. Deb wanted to create a new scholarship fund that would support the passions of both her husband and their son.

It was during one of their calls that Deb said something that Brian couldn't forget. Deb told Brian that Zak loved his time at our University. That, more than anything, she wished he could have completed his degree before he died.

Brian got off the phone, and he immediately started calling colleagues who could help fulfill Deb's dream. The next time Brian spoke to Deb, he was able to confirm that Zak had the credits he needed to graduate—and that we could award Zak a posthumous degree.

Friends, Deb Malitz is here with us today. And it is my honor to invite her to the stage to accept this diploma on Zak's behalf.

Deb, thank you for joining us. I know this moment is both very meaningful and very difficult for you.

When Deb found out what we were doing, she said that “nowhere but Ball State could she have seen this happening for her family.”

She said that she knew our campus was a special place. But this act—this one meaningful act—had exceeded her every expectation.

Brian's act of kindness deserves our respect and our admiration.

But what I have come to appreciate, particularly during the pandemic, is that Brian's compassion is not unique on our campus. To the contrary, this culture of compassion permeates our University—it defines who we are.

Let me share a few more examples of how our colleagues embraced a simple opportunity to make a difference in the lives of other people.

First, there's Eduardo Alvarez, a student who worked in our North Dining Hall.

A visitor to our campus last Fall was trying to share information with her non-English speaking friend about how to order drinks at Starbucks. Eduardo overheard their conversation, and he wanted to help. He asked them, “In Spanish or in English?” This visitor was so moved by Eduardo's assistance that she wanted to tell us about her experience. In her email expressing her gratitude to Eduardo, she wrote: “It was so above and beyond for him to notice this opportunity to help my friend not only learn what he needed, but to feel a connection with another Spanish speaker... It was a great experience.”

Last Spring, Tammy Goodpaster stepped up to support another person.

Tammy, who also works in Dining Services, was eating lunch behind the Student Center while a table of high school students sat nearby. One of the young women in the group was talking loudly, describing how she was bullied and that she didn't have many friends.

As Tammy got up to leave, she walked over to this student. Tammy told her that she could hear what she was saying, and Tammy wanted this student to know she was a wonderful person who shouldn't let other people treat her differently.

This student was overwhelmed by Tammy's compliments. The student told Tammy, "Those are the nicest things anyone has ever said to me! Thank you!"

After Tammy went inside, her colleague observed this young woman put her face in her hands.

Tammy didn't know that her colleague told her supervisor about this heartfelt exchange. Now that Tammy knows that we all know about it, I want to tell Tammy how much I appreciate her embracing the chance to support another person.

Tammy was there to encourage that young woman that day. And I know that, especially during the pandemic, many of our faculty and staff have stepped up in much the same way for our students, including Ky'lie Garland-Yates.

As an undergraduate student from Detroit, Ky'lie was studying geography and her passion for weather when her life started to fall apart. There were several deaths in her family, and her professors were willing to work with her as she grieved. Ky'lie said, "They made sure I was okay."

Ky'lie could tell their empathy was genuine. She said, "I wouldn't have been able to get back on track if it wasn't for that support and assistance. When teachers are passionate about what they teach, they go beyond being professors. That's what I saw at Ball State."

Another student who felt supported by a colleague is Conner Freeman. Conner's mother, Velencia, sent an email in June to share her appreciation for how Jason Rivera made good on his promise to look after her son.

Throughout Conner's first year, when he met with Jason, Conner would tell his mother how happy he was and how much it meant that Jason said hello to him.

When Jason told Velencia he was available for questions, Velencia contacted him several times, even to ask for a recommendation for a Black barber in Muncie to cut her son's hair. Velencia wrote, "It was the small—but sometimes huge—things that let me know Jason truly cares about his students' overall well-being. I am so grateful for his help."

Velencia also wanted us to know that Conner earned his best grades yet this past Spring—a 3.0 GPA.

I have come to know Jason and many of you. Each day, all of you embrace these encounters as an opportunity for you to improve the life of another person. For you, this work is not simply a job. It's a calling.

The way we make our students feel is what they remember most about our University, long after they've earned their degrees.

When Megan Farley visited our campus as a prospective student, she described how she got "a really good vibe" from the theatre and dance faculty. Megan said, "They really emphasize the whole family aspect of the program, and it was an environment I was drawn to. So that's why I came here."

Megan graduated in 2012. Today, she is living her dream, working on Broadway as the associate director for *Six: The Musical*, a position that earned her several Tony Award nominations this past June.

Megan said that Ball State is “a special community” And I agree.

Last year, Megan returned to our campus to mentor our theatre students and to choreograph and direct their fall musical, *Bring It On*. That’s another reason—the engagement of our alumni in mentoring opportunities—that makes our University distinctive.

I am grateful to our Alumni Association for creating Cardinals Connect, which is a technology platform that enables our graduates to sign up to serve as mentors for our students. Presently, more than 3,700 graduates have volunteered to serve our students by signing up on Cardinals Connect.

Ball State is distinctive because we are grateful and we are optimistic. Let me explain.

In January, I embarked on another round of conversations with faculty and staff all across campus. The provost joined me when I met with faculty and staff in Academic Affairs. I flew solo—get it, I flew solo—when I met with our colleagues in the other divisions.

In total, I participated in 21 of these conversations during the Spring semester, and approximately 1,400 of you attended one of these conversations, either in person or by Zoom.

I appreciate the feedback that I received in all of these conversations. But one of them was particularly memorable.

On April 13, I met at 6 a.m. in Worthen Arena with the women and men who work the third shift—from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. I didn’t talk about our enrollment initiatives or our incentive-based budget model. Nobody wants to talk about those things at 6 a.m. on a cold, dark morning.

Instead, I told our colleagues how much all of us appreciate that, while we sleep, they work all night to clean our classrooms and our offices. Then, we drank coffee and juice, and we ate doughnuts from our North Dining Hall. I was moved by the collegiality and appreciation that filled the room that early morning.

A few days later, I received a “thank you” card personally signed by all of these hard-working women and men—the largest “thank you” card that I have ever seen.

A remarkable display of gratitude, one of our enduring values. Now you know why I always say, “I have the good fortune to serve as the president of Ball State University.”

I am also fortunate—and I am inspired—by how you embrace a challenge as an opportunity—and how you embrace a challenge with a sense of optimism.

I’ll share just one recent example.

In May, I convened a meeting of more than 100 of our colleagues who have leadership positions at our University.

In preparation for the meeting, I asked them to read a book entitled, “The Great Upheaval.” This book describes the many challenges that threaten the viability of higher education in the next decade or two.

During one part of the meeting, I asked our colleagues to offer suggestions about how we can accelerate the implementation of our strategic priorities in order to meet the challenges described in that book. Some of those strategic priorities are foundational to the future vitality of our University, including enrollment and student success.

Other strategic priorities can make us truly distinctive, so that we can thrive, notwithstanding the many challenges that are threatening to disrupt higher education. For example, as a community-engaged university, I think we must be a catalytic agent for local and regional revitalization. And to achieve our mission of empowering our students to have fulfilling careers and to lead meaningful lives, we must enable all of you—our faculty and our staff—to find fulfillment and meaning in your work at our University.

I was impressed by the specific suggestions our colleagues made during that session. But I was inspired by what our colleagues shared during the other session that morning.

At the outset of that session, I acknowledged that the pandemic has been difficult for all of us—both professionally and personally. But I also said that I believed that each one of us has also experienced some joy during this period—some “silver lining” during this time of trouble.

The people at each table then spent about an hour sharing their stories of success and satisfaction. Then, a representative from each table shared several of these “silver linings” with the entire group.

Our colleagues shared stories of student success. Hard work. Creative innovations. Courage. Personal joy—in a wedding or a birth. Or peace on a quiet walk in the woods or on a beach.

There was pride. There was laughter. And there were a few tears.

But the prevailing sentiment in the room that morning was summed up by one of our department chairs. She said, “If we can do all of this during a pandemic, we can do anything.”

Yes, indeed. That’s true. We can do anything.

At the end of the May retreat, I had an opportunity to talk to them for a few minutes about another book that I’d read recently. The book is called “Legacy.” And this book resonated with me for two reasons.

It uses a sports team—New Zealand’s “All Blacks” rugby team—as a platform for a discussion about leadership and finding meaning through work and

service. The “All Blacks” are the most successful international rugby team in history. In the past few decades, this team has won more world championships than all of the other countries in the world combined.

But the book is really about how the “All Blacks” have come to personify the enduring impact of servant leadership. How each one of us can be a “good ancestor.” How each one of us can leave an enduring legacy.

Permit me to read to you a passage from the book:

“Perhaps it is because its core idea—of legacy, of leaving the jersey in a better place, of planting trees that we will never sit in the shade of—it’s an eternal and universal constant that speaks to the deepest and the best in all of us. Our time on this frail, isolated planet is fleeting and our ambitions unlimited, so the challenge that we all face is how to lead an authentic, fulfilling, successful life that makes—as well as a living—a difference. How do we create a life that creates a positive impact on the lives of those around us, and those who will follow, and thus leaves a lasting legacy?”

I believe this passage describes our personal aspirations and our University’s fundamental mission. To do the hard work that will improve the lives of other people for many generations to come.

To achieve that impact, we have to empower and inspire our graduates to do the same in their own lives.

And you know what, that’s what we do. Let me give you one example.

Annie Burns-Hicks graduated from Ball State Teachers College in 1958. After she graduated, Annie returned to her hometown of Hammond, Indiana, where she applied for her first teaching job. Her application was promptly denied. Annie was told that Hammond “wasn’t ready for a colored teacher.”

Annie had moved to Hammond with her parents and her siblings in 1944. Her father, Albert, had moved the family from Mississippi after witnessing two young Black men being lynched.

Albert said to his daughter: “I’ve brought you north for a better life, and the only thing I ask from you is for you to try and make this world a better place.”

Annie never forgot her father’s words. After her teaching application was rejected, she decided to sue the school district in federal court. A few months later, she won the legal battle to become Hammond’s first Black teacher.

In Fall 1960, Annie’s first job was at Maywood Elementary, where she herself had been a student.

Annie’s courageous actions energized the fight for civil rights in her community. Her hiring paved the way for Hammond’s first Black police officer, the first Black firefighter, and the first Black school trustee.

This past January, the city’s school board voted to honor Annie’s legacy by renaming Maywood—the same school she attended and taught at for 40 years—they renamed it the Annie Burns-Hicks Elementary School.

Le Terre Smith, the school’s principal, said that Annie “paved the way for African American educators and for women.” Annie’s story, the principal said, “is a great example for our students and for our children.”

Indeed, Annie’s story is a great example for all of us.

So, today, I will recognize Annie Burns-Hicks by bestowing upon her one of our University’s highest honors—the President’s Medal of Distinction.

This medal is awarded to women and men who have made significant contributions to the advancement of our institution, our community, our state, and our Nation.

And as the president of our University, I believe that Annie is a most deserving recipient.

Annie is 85 years old now and lives in an assisted living facility in Indianapolis. We are fortunate that her good health and good spirits have allowed her to join us today, along with her daughter, Miltina.

Annie, it is my distinct honor to present to you this President’s Medal of Distinction.

Annie’s legacy endures in the lives of the thousands of students who were impacted by her life story and by her teaching in the classroom. She has left the school where she taught—and the community in which she was raised—in a much better place. And she is an enduring source of inspiration for all of us.

A moment ago, I told you about how the book “Legacy”—the book about the “All Blacks”—how it prompted me to think more deeply about our collective legacy.

The book describes that, before every game, the “All Blacks” perform the haka, which is the ceremonial dance of the indigenous Maori people.

Permit me to read another short quote from the book:

“The haka reminds us of the inherent fragility of all life. How little time is given to each of us. And how much we still have to do. It reminds us: *‘This is our time.’*”

With each passing day, as I told my colleagues who gathered at our May retreat, I have begun to feel a greater sense of urgency.

I began my first day as your president on May 15, 2017. So, I have served you now for five years. And my current contract extends through June 2027. So, I have about five years remaining to serve as your president.

When I was younger, five years seemed like a long time. A very long time.

Now I have come to appreciate that five years is not much time at all.

And I have this anxiety—I have this fear that I don't have enough time to help you accomplish our ambitious agenda—to implement all of the innovative, impactful initiatives in our strategic plan.

This sense of urgency—my sense of urgency—is heightened because I believe that we have an opportunity to do something special, something very special, here at Ball State University.

And I don't want us to squander this opportunity.

Instead, I want to embrace each day with a purpose and a passion to support you—to support your efforts and your contributions. To help all of you to serve your legacy.

It's quite likely that none of us will be like Annie and have a building named after us to honor our legacy.

But each one of us can take great pride in knowing that our hard work will transform the lives of many, many people for generations to come.

Please continue to join me on this quest.

Because this is our time. This is our time.

Thank you for listening. And thank you for your service.

Now, as most of you know, five years ago, I began the practice of concluding this program with a musical performance.

And each year, I call Bill Jenkins to enlist his help. I suggest a song. Bill listens politely—and then he and Michael Rafter select a completely different song.

Notwithstanding my streak of unsuccessful recommendations, I tried once again this year.

When I called Bill in June, I suggested one of the classic, inspirational songs from *The Sound of Music*—"Climb Every Mountain."

After an awkward silence, Bill said, "Um, do you have any other thoughts?"

I responded, "Okay. If you want something a little more up tempo, how about one of the R&B classics—"Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" by McFadden and Whitehead?"

Again, an awkward silence. And I bet Bill was fighting, fighting the urge to say, "You can't even spell R&B!"

But Bill suppressed that impulse and said, "Okay, how about I talk with Michael, and we'll see what we can come up with?"

True to form, Bill enlisted the talents of his colleagues and our students to come up with a different—and much better—arrangement for you.

Please welcome to the stage a talented group of theatre students to perform a medley of songs. This arrangement was written by Michael and one of our students, Imani Brissett.

Enjoy!