



**BALL STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Office of the President

**GEOFFREY S. MEARNS
FALL CONVOCATION
EMENS AUDITORIUM
AUGUST 15, 2025
9:00 A.M.**

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

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for joining us. I am grateful for your continued commitment to our mission.

To all of the award recipients, congratulations. Your contributions are valued. Let's take another moment to express our appreciation for our colleagues.

In his remarks, Anand welcomed our newest faculty members and our newest deans.

I'd now like to introduce a few other special guests.

In June, I appointed Mark Liebling to serve as our first Vice President for People and Culture. I elevated this role because, if we are going to fulfill our mission to our students, then we must do more to ensure that our faculty and staff find fulfillment in their work and meaning in their lives.

The newest member of our Board of Trustees is Aidan Davis. Aidan is a junior studying biochemistry. I look forward to working with him and all of our trustees. We are fortunate to have a Board that is committed to our mission.

I also want to recognize the members of our Foundation Board of Directors and our Alumni Council. Whether you are in the audience, or watching via livestream, thank you for your service.

We are fortunate that Senator Scott Alexander has joined us. Jerry Alexander from the Governor's Office and Steve Justus from Senator Banks' office are also here today. Thank you for coming.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to my wife, Jennifer. She is a constant source of guidance and support. Thank you.

My passion for our mission is why I am grateful for the opportunity to begin my ninth academic year as the president of Ball State University. Today, and every day, it is my great good fortune to serve as your president.

As I prepared my remarks, I reflected on the past eight years. I was reminded of that adage—“the only constant is change.”

Some changes we’ve experienced—like receiving \$35 million from the Lilly Endowment—have been for the good. Other changes—like enduring a global pandemic—significantly disrupted our operations. In higher education, we are now facing some—“emerging challenges.”

I’ll speak more about that later.

But first, let’s celebrate our successes—and appreciate the transformative impact that we have on our students and the communities that we serve. Because we prepare for an uncertain future from a position of strength.

We anticipate that our incoming freshman class will be approximately 3,725 new students—larger than last year’s class. So, for the third consecutive year, our freshman class is larger than our pre-pandemic ten-year average.

This Fall’s freshman class is well prepared. The average high school GPA is 3.57. Approximately 30 percent are first-generation and more than 40 percent are Pell eligible.

Our ability to sustain our enrollment is impressive, given that the college-going rate in Indiana is now only 52 percent. It’s been trending in the wrong direction for more than a decade.

This Fall, our total enrollment is approximately 1,000 more students than just three years ago.

Our sustained success is possible because of the work of our colleagues in Enrollment Planning and Management, along with creative contributions from our colleagues in our Division of Marketing and Communications.

I am also grateful to the support our colleges provide in recruiting outstanding students. As a result, we are making enrollment gains in several colleges.

This Fall, approximately 620 new freshmen will enroll in our Honors College. And this year, total enrollment in our Honors College will exceed 1,600 students—the largest in our history.

Since the pandemic, total enrollment in our Estopinal College of Architecture and Planning has grown 20 percent—from 920 to 1,100 students.

In that same five years, enrollment in our College of Fine Arts has also increased, including double-digit growth in our School of Art and our School of Music.

Last year, we had the largest total number of graduate students in our history. We are on track to match our historic graduate enrollment from last year, with approximately 5,600 graduate students enrolled this Fall.

It takes a lot of work to recruit new students. And the principal reason students choose Ball State is because of our outstanding academic programs.

This year, our Sports Link program was recognized as the No. 1 sports media program in the country from the Broadcast Education Association. A few weeks after receiving this recognition, our students earned three first-place awards at this year's SVG College Sports Media Awards.

Our Sports Link students embody our enduring value of excellence. So do students on our speech team, which won the annual Indiana Speech Tournament for the 15th consecutive year.

Excellence is also reflected in our actuarial science program, which recently received an exceptional designation from the Society of Actuaries. We are now one of just two public universities in Indiana to be recognized as a Center for Actuarial Excellence.

A few months ago, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business—AACSB—reaffirmed its accreditation for our business and accounting programs in the Miller College of Business. This designation is significant, because it is held by only the top six percent of business schools in the world.

And this year, our Department of Social Work celebrates its 50th anniversary. Our department is the oldest—and the largest—accredited undergraduate social work program in Indiana.

Dr. Ron Dolon has been teaching social work courses for longer than our program has existed. This Fall, he will teach students in an immersive learning class dedicated to creating promotional and training materials to integrate social workers into police departments.

Dr. Dolon is here today. Ron, please stand so we can recognize your 54 years of service to our University. Thank you, Ron.

Our faculty in Teachers College are also outstanding. They are also innovative, as demonstrated by the dual credit pathways the college designed to align with the state's new focus on work-based learning. Enrollment in our teacher preparation dual credit pathways increased from just four students in 2023 to 92 students this year.

Our Teachers College also received an A+ rating from the Indiana Department of Education for integrating the "Science of Reading" curriculum into our teacher preparation programs.

"Science of Reading" is also accelerating the progress of our partnership with Muncie Community Schools.

Two years after adopting the literacy curriculum, four MCS elementary schools showed double-digit growth in pass rates this Spring compared to last Spring. All six MCS elementary schools are now in the state's high-growth quadrant. In fact, this past year, the IREAD scores in MCS elementary schools increased more than nine percentage points—that's double the state average!

And MCS's high school graduation rate is now 91 percent—which exceeds the state average.

These are just a few examples of the positive progress underway at MCS.

I invited members of the MCS school board and administration to join us this morning. Some of them are here so that we can express our appreciation to them.

I am grateful to these leaders—and to the outstanding MCS teachers and staff—for their continued commitment to providing an excellent public education for every child in Muncie. We are proud to support your work.

Our partnership with MCS exemplifies our University's commitment to serve our community. Another vital community partnership is how our public media programming informs, educates, and entertains viewers and listeners across the region.

Just last month, Ball State Public Media earned three national awards from the Public Media Journalists Association. Among those awards was a first-place prize for a local segment of "Morning Edition" hosted by Stan Sollars, who has been the program's anchor for 30 years.

As some of you know, reductions in federal and state funding have put public broadcasting at risk. Nevertheless, we will continue to provide objective news and engaging entertainment all across East Central Indiana.

We established Ball State Public Media five years ago in order to provide more local programming and to provide practical educational experiences to our students.

Our University's commitment to providing every student access to high-impact learning experiences is another reason why students choose Ball State.

This past year, more than 2,700 students participated in immersive learning experiences, and more than 1,600 students conducted research alongside our faculty and staff.

To enable this work, our colleagues secured approximately \$14 million in external research funding this past year.

Our College of Sciences and Humanities received \$2.8 million, half of which supports undergraduate research experiences for our students.

Our Teachers College received approximately \$1.2 million to support people with autism. And most of the \$3.7 million earned by our College of Health supports our faculty's work to improve health outcomes in our community.

In short, outstanding academic programs and distinctive high-impact practices attract students to our University.

And the vibrant student life we offer all across our beautiful campus enriches their educational experiences.

We have more than 400 student organizations, and our campus is a regional destination for arts and culture.

This past Monday and Tuesday evening, Jennifer and I hosted approximately 700 new freshmen who participated in our Summer Bridge Program. Each year, we enjoy this opportunity to meet some of our new students.

And Jennifer always encourages them to take advantage of all the wonderful programs and facilities that we have.

Jennifer invites students to explore our David Owsley Museum of Art. In fact, she's probably responsible for a few dozen of the 17,000 people who visited the museum this past year.

Jennifer also encourages students to attend programs at our Brown Planetarium. Last year, approximately 24,000 guests visited the planetarium.

This past year, CFA hosted more than 450 events. These performances attracted more than 95,000 patrons, including thousands of our students.

And for me—and perhaps for many of you—the most outstanding event of the past year was watching David Letterman interview Caitlin Clark.

More than 3,000 people were in Emens Auditorium that night. You can still watch the program on Netflix. It's been nominated for an Emmy. I am grateful to my colleagues, especially Stephanie Arrington and Angel Tuttle, for making this event possible.

Perhaps the most visible draw for students who come to Ball State is our outstanding facilities.

This Spring, we completed the renovation of the Cooper Science Building—the final phase of our comprehensive plan to expand and renovate our STEM and health professions facilities.

And last year, CCIM finished extensive studio renovations. These studios include an LED wall that's transforming how faculty teach and students learn.

To us, these physical changes are a tangible demonstration of our ongoing commitment to student success.

To prospective students, these facilities prompt them to enroll.

In April, more than 1,000 people attended CCIM+. During the day, the college demonstrated how our new technology is preparing graduates for jobs of the future.

In June, 26 high school students visited our Foundational Sciences Building as part of a free residential forensic science camp funded by the Lilly Endowment. In a few years, some of those campers will be among the freshmen who will enroll

in our undergraduate program in forensic science—which will enroll 70 new students this Fall.

In our Health Professions Building, 400 high school students explored their interest in health careers in our Club MEDIC Summer Experience. These students also learned about how our College of Health serves our community.

This past year, our Healthy Lifestyle Center held 460 outreach events—health fairs and mobile clinics in underserved areas of our region. And approximately 260 students delivered care to 2,200 community members in the college's Interprofessional Community Clinics.

All of the buildings I just mentioned are substantial investments from our state, and I am grateful to the General Assembly for this financial support.

But many of our new facilities are funded by our generous graduates and benefactors.

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

We have now raised more than \$330 million toward our campaign goal of \$350 million.

We still have nearly two years left, but I am confident that we will exceed this goal this year. Don't tell anyone, but our stretch goal is to exceed \$400 million before the campaign officially ends on June 30, 2027.

Some of the philanthropic investments in our facilities will benefit our outstanding student-athletes. For example, Mike and Katy Shebek donated \$5 million to enable us to design and build a new locker room and clubhouse for our baseball team. And Eric Foss donated \$4 million as the lead gift for the new Foss Championship Performance Center.

Speaking of student-athletes, let's recognize our women's basketball team for winning both the MAC regular season and tournament championships.

Let's also celebrate that, at Ball State, we still call them student-athletes for a very good reason. Because last year, across all sports programs, our Cardinals earned a combined GPA of 3.46. That's the highest combined GPA in our history. And our women's golf team led the entire NCAA with a team GPA of 3.97.

The most visible project we're funding through philanthropy is our ambitious plan to revitalize The Village.

Construction is well underway on our Performing Arts Center and The Cantio Hotel.

In May, we celebrated the launch of our new Center for Innovation and Collaboration with a beam-signing ceremony.

And in June, we held a groundbreaking ceremony with our partner, Trademark Construction, for the new owner-occupied homes and townhomes that

are being constructed immediately adjacent to The Village in the Riverside-Normal Neighborhood.

Perhaps the most enduring impact of philanthropy, though, is on our people.

In each of the past five years, our Foundation has provided more than \$4 million of philanthropic financial support to our students. The scholarships help us recruit outstanding students.

That support also enables us to retain students with financial need.

This past year, we distributed more than \$90,000 to students through our Jack Beyerl Emergency Aid Fund. Each of these grants is relatively small, but they are transformational for many of our students. Permit me to share a few excerpts from thank you notes that grant recipients sent to donors who support this fund:

One young woman who wants to become a teacher wrote: “I worked so hard all summer, and even got a job during school, and it wasn’t enough. Thank you for this donation ... I don’t know what I would have done without it.”

An international student who is fulfilling his dream of studying in our country wrote: “Receiving this grant is a powerful reminder that kindness and compassion exist in the world. It fuels my determination to work harder, push forward, and one day be in a position to help others as you have helped me.”

And a graduate student who used her grant to pay her rent wrote: “Because of people like you, students like me can face difficulties with hope and strength.”

Hope and strength. We all need a little more hope and strength these days.

I am grateful to our benefactors for their gifts and to our colleagues who help distribute these grants to our students. This work requires a good team. And we have a great team.

Philanthropic support also enables our faculty to conduct important research.

Last Fall, Professor VJ Rubenstein became our inaugural Thomas E. and Karen Bumb Lauer Distinguished Professor of Natural Sciences.

This endowed position was created by two accomplished Ball State graduates who met as undergraduates in an organic chemistry class.

Tom Lauer worked for many years at the Indiana Department of Natural Resources before he became a distinguished professor in our biology department. Karen had an impressive 35-year career in medicine. She was an anesthesiologist who was involved in the first heart transplant in Indiana.

Tom and Karen wanted to make a gift that allowed them to witness the direct impact of their generosity.

The professorship they created includes a stipend, which VJ is using to purchase supplies and equipment for his work studying how our cells detect and destroy damaged proteins that lead to neurological disease. The gift also enables VJ to spend more time in the lab conducting his research with help from students.

VJ said his new five-year appointment is especially meaningful because Tom was his mentor when VJ first joined our faculty.

Tom and Karen are here today. Please stand so that we can recognize your shared commitment to science and to student success at Ball State University.

It's a great story. It's a story that demonstrates how strong relationships are vital for our success.

The collective effort of so many people—faculty, staff, and benefactors—that collective effort produces transformational results for our students.

Let me share two final points—one is an important statistic and the other is an exceptional distinction.

Last year, we conferred approximately 5,000 degrees and credentials. In the five years since the onset of the pandemic, we have conferred more than 31,000 degrees and credentials.

That impressive number is a measure of the impact of your work. And Senator Alexander, as you know, approximately 80 percent of the women and men who earned a bachelor's degree at Ball State stay in Indiana to work, to live, and to serve other Hoosiers. We are proud to be the public research university in Indiana that is committed to serving the people and the taxpayers of Indiana.

The distinction is our recent classification by the Carnegie Foundation as an "Opportunity College and University."

To receive this designation, Carnegie calculated two objective factors.

First, does your student body reflect the state's demographics? That is, are you providing access to a representative student population, including First Gen and Pell-eligible students?

Second, do your graduates, eight years after graduation, earn on average at least 50 percent more compared to people in your state without a college degree? That is, can the institution demonstrate a significant positive return on investment?

We met both criteria. We are the only public institution in Indiana to receive this new designation from Carnegie. And we are one of just 27 colleges and universities in the country—and the only institution in Indiana—public or private—to earn this designation in combination with our designation as a doctoral university with high research activity—an R2 institution.

These two designations are impressive. But we are also one of just 14 institutions in the country to also earn Carnegie's Community Engagement classification.

These three Carnegie classifications are an external validation of what we know to be true—that Ball State is one of only a very small number of institutions in the country that excels across all three aspects of our mission.

We provide transformational educational experiences to our students.

We engage in research, scholarship, and creative endeavors that enhance our teaching and improve the lives of other people.

And we support the communities that we serve.

That's the educational Triple Crown. Please give yourselves and your colleagues a round of applause.

It's on this strong foundation that we developed the next iteration of our long-term strategic plan.

Last Summer, I convened a small committee to lead our planning process.

This committee selected approximately 140 people to serve on one of 10 working groups. Each group prepared a report on a current or proposed strategic imperative.

We then distributed two surveys to faculty and staff, students, alumni, and community members—and approximately 7,000 people submitted responses.

We also hosted open forums on campus and in the community. More than 250 people attended one of these programs.

In short, we received substantial input. These responses also demonstrate that so many people are invested in our future.

People believe our long-term goals and strategies are still important, notwithstanding the passage of time and the disruption of a global pandemic.

People have been working to implement our strategic plan—and they want to continue to do that work. This second iteration of our long-term plan reflects those sentiments.

But there are a few adjustments and additions.

Some of these adjustments are modest, but important.

For example, with MCS, the emphasis of our partnership is now exclusively focused on supporting educators in the school district to improve academic outcomes for MCS students and to enhance the learning experiences of our students.

With respect to research and scholarship, we added a new strategic imperative to make clear that creative works constitute scholarship.

We also added three new strategic imperatives.

The first new imperative addresses artificial intelligence.

This imperative recognizes the potential impact of AI on our teaching, on student learning, and on our operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Let me share examples of how this transition is already underway.

Clinicians in our College of Health are using AI to ease the burden of documentation, so that they can focus on patient care.

Our Graduate School is planning professional development workshops on the challenges and opportunities posed by AI in graduate education.

And our Sales Center in the Miller College of Business has launched a grant program to help faculty to incorporate instruction about AI into their curriculum.

AI is also influencing the career trajectories of our students.

Paytn Green is a two-time graduate of CCIM. She earned both her undergraduate and master's degrees in public relations. Now, she's working toward her second Ball State graduate degree, an MBA in artificial intelligence.

Last Fall, Paytn's first research paper was accepted into a national marketing conference.

The theme of the conference was the effect of artificial intelligence on the marketing world. Paytn traveled to the conference, where she presented her work on the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior.

This conference was rocket fuel for Paytn's ambition. After she finishes her MBA, she will pursue a doctorate.

AI was also the focus of the winning thesis of this year's Janice Hanako Shimizu Award. The award is named in honor of the former director of our Master of Architecture program.

This year's winner was Patrick McManama. Patrick investigated how AI, machine vision, and computational logic are redefining architectural thought. Faculty jurors praised Patrick's thesis as "forward-thinking" and "intellectually ambitious."

Patrick's future employer agreed. Patrick has accepted a position with Morphosis, a design firm in Los Angeles that is known for the innovative use of digital tools.

So that's how AI is enhancing the work we do in the classroom.

AI is also enhancing our operations.

Our Office of Information Technology is implementing custom AI solutions across campus. GrantsAI will allow researchers to enter a prompt and be instantly matched with relevant federal grant opportunities. Chatbots will assist online learners. And AI-assisted evaluations of hand-written forms will be used by the Career Center at campus job fairs.

The second imperative we added to our strategic plan reflects our enhanced commitment to relationship-rich educational experiences.

This concept is vital to student success, but it's not new to us.

For decades, we've nurtured a relationship-rich environment on this campus. And we will continue to do so in all of our interactions with our students.

Permit me to share a few stories that illustrate the impact of this important work.

The first one is from Tia Gilbert, whose child attends Ball State. In February, Tia shared her appreciation for the relationship the Gilbert family had established with Debra Fenty, the director of Cardinal Central.

In a LinkedIn post, Tia wrote: “Ms. Fenty is intelligent, knowledgeable, polite, and she really loves helping her students.”

Tia shared how grateful she was that the Gilberts had met Debra. Tia described Debra—in all caps—as an “ANGEL.”

Debra, I hope you know how much I appreciate your efforts. You—and all of our staff—do a great job making sure our students feel welcome at Ball State—making sure that all of them know that they belong here.

The support that some students need is vital to their ability to have equal access to classes and campus life. This past year, our Office of Disability Services supported more than 5,000 students. That number demonstrates why we continue to be nationally recognized for serving students with disabilities.

One of those students is Ethan Atterson. Ethan is earning his Master of Arts degree from our School of Music. Ethan has limited arm mobility, which makes it hard for him to conduct music with a baton. As a result, he’s exploring how to direct music using adaptations and assistive technology.

Ethan has a simple answer for his innovative research: “Disabled people exist in the classical music industry. We deserve to have equal opportunities in that industry, and we deserve to have the chance to prove ourselves as leaders.”

Ethan’s graduate advisor is Jon Truitt. Professor Truitt, along with our disabilities staff, receive effusive praise from this budding maestro.

Ethan said, “Ball State has provided me with top-notch faculty ... And the University has an inclusive environment. Ball State does a good job of holding up its principle of beneficence, and I am happy to be a Cardinal because of that.”

Another professor who fosters meaningful connections with our students is Tim Berg.

Karina McDougale was about to graduate this Spring with her business administration degree when she asked Dean Buss if she could speak at the medallion ceremony for graduating seniors in the Honors College.

During her remarks at the ceremony, Karina described growing up in a family that struggled to make ends meet. For a while, they ate meals on cardboard boxes because they couldn’t afford a kitchen table.

As a first-generation student, she explained that receiving a scholarship allowed her to focus on her studies instead of worrying about how she would pay for college.

And Karina identified the one person who’d made the biggest impact on her—Professor Berg.

Karina wrote: “I had the privilege of learning from Dr. Berg for six semesters. His guidance, support, and belief in my potential helped me to grow as a student and as a person. It’s professors like him who make all the difference, and I’ll carry the lessons he taught me for the rest of my life.”

I have one more story—a story that involves a profound loss.

Most of you know that Dr. Maria Williams Hawkins passed away earlier this year. Several of her pallbearers were former members of our student chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists—an organization that Dr. Maria led for many years.

In 2024, our NABJ chapter was recognized as the National Student Chapter of the Year. That so many of Dr. Maria's students attended her memorial service in May demonstrates that relationship-rich educational experiences are a defining feature of the compassionate character of our University community.

To honor Dr. Maria's memory, let us elevate this work.

The third new imperative relates to purpose exploration. I want to share two stories that exemplify why we want all of our students to develop intentional pathways to professional fulfillment and personal meaning.

The first story is about Elizabeth Combs, who received a military scholarship. Elizabeth could have attended another college or university with an ROTC program in her home state of Virginia. But she chose Ball State, primarily because of our outstanding nursing program.

Elizabeth thrived on our campus. She became the head of her military unit. She was admired by her peers. Faculty recognized Elizabeth's talent—that she could be an infantry leader. But she was committed to becoming an Army nurse.

Elizabeth was guided by her belief that her career aspirations would bring professional fulfillment and personal meaning. Her decision made her family, including her grandfather, an Army veteran, proud. And our Nation's shortage of military nurses meant that the work that she wanted to do was important and urgent.

After passing her national licensing exam on the first attempt, Elizabeth is now officially an Army nurse. She's putting her Ball State degree to good use, caring for other women and men who serve our country.

The other story is about Ahmaud Carroll-Tubbs, a landscape architecture student.

Ahmaud is a native of Indianapolis. He has returned to that city for several internships, including one with Indiana Landmarks. The non-profit organization is dedicated to saving our state's historically significant places. And for a Summer, Ahmaud immersed himself in researching Greenlawn Cemetery, the city's first cemetery and largest burial ground for Black people in Indiana.

Ahmaud helped preserve the history of African Americans buried there, including the great-great-grandfather of Muhammad Ali. Because of Ahmaud's work—and the work of many historians, archaeologists, and community members—government officials have halted development plans to allow for an excavation of the historic burial site.

In a recent profile written about Ahmaud in *Landscape Architecture* magazine, Professor April Westcott said that Ahmaud found a cultural connection through his internship that isn't easy to teach in the classroom.

Using the skills he acquired at Ball State, Ahmaud designed a memorial to honor the women and men who are buried in the cemetery. In doing so, he discovered his purpose.

Ahmaud said: "Prior to this, I knew I wanted to do landscape architecture, but I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with it. I wanted to be able to say that I positively impact the lives of many people and the environment itself, and I feel like doing this type of work does that."

I've spoken about these two new strategic initiatives because I believe they are that important to the work we do at our University. They are also closely related. Because establishing a genuine relationship with a student can help them advance on a pathway to their purpose.

And when we demonstrate to students the value of a relationship-rich education, it also inspires them to return to campus as graduates to share those experiences with our current students.

This past year, many graduates have returned to our University to do just that. I want to tell you about two of them.

When I asked Kayla Davion if she would speak at our Commencement in May, she graciously—and enthusiastically—accepted my invitation.

Kayla is a Broadway star. She's also a 2017 graduate who started an alumni ambassador program in our Department of Theater and Dance—the same department that gave her the confidence to pursue her professional dreams.

While she was back on campus, Kayla told me how her Ball State degree continues to advance her career. She said: "In many audition rooms I walk into, they always say, 'Oh my gosh, you went to Ball State!'" I've only heard people speak highly of the school and its people. They recognize us by our humanity. I think that's important. It's gotten me through many doors—not only because of the resources it provides, but because people there are a prime example of hard work and kindness."

Hard work and kindness. That's you. That's us.

The other graduate is Ron Galbraith.

Ron is a retired CEO with a distinctive career path—one that began in academia, continued in healthcare, and ended as an entrepreneur. But before he earned career success, Ron was a Ball State student.

Ron's experiences as a first-generation college student in the 1960s shaped his professional aspirations. Ron always speaks highly of our faculty. His mentor was Professor Victor Lawhead. Dr. Lawhead encouraged Ron's love of learning. Ron earned two degrees from our University, and then he became a professor at

Vanderbilt. He was later a senior executive at one of the Nation's largest healthcare systems.

This Spring, I invited Ron to return to campus for the first time in decades. As a guest on my podcast, he described how he barely recognized the campus—it had grown so much and was now so beautiful. After we recorded our episode, he handed me a poem he'd written in honor of his mentor.

The full text of Ron's poem is on the screen. Ron described Dr. Lawhead's influence on his life:

"You gave me the gift of critical thinking and I have never been able to learn the same way again."

"You gave me the gift of 'asking questions' and I haven't been able to teach the same way again."

"You gave me your latest long list of books to read or re-read and I have carried a 'Must Read' list in my pocket ever since."

"You gave me the gift of embracing uncertainty while holding out for the truth and I have yet to figure it out all out."

"Many have benefitted and even passed these gifts along. As one recipient, I know these gifts made all the difference."

Ron's poem is a powerful tribute to a man who was his teacher, his mentor, and his friend.

We also modified our strategic plan to ensure that these opportunities are available to every student, based on that student's individual needs and interests.

We reaffirmed this point in a revised definition of our enduring value of "inclusiveness." Our definition now makes clear our continuing commitment to respect different cultural experiences and intellectual perspectives in all people.

We have also amended two relevant strategic imperatives to reaffirm our commitments to academic freedom and to freedom of expression, while ensuring that we develop strategies and initiatives that promote greater understanding of cultural differences in programs for students and employees.

Now, I know that it hasn't been easy navigating the federal and state changes that came our way this year. And I know that some of you were disappointed with the decision that I announced in April.

But I believe that we've found a way to adapt to these changes, while retaining our commitment to welcome and educate and support every student who enrolls at our University—and to ensure that every student will receive the individualized support and encouragement that they need to graduate and to have a fulfilling career and a meaningful life. That is our collective responsibility. And that is my commitment to you—and to all of our students.

Because of our resolve, we will continue to honor the promise that we make to our students—and to each other.

I recognize that some people are still concerned about whether we will be able to honor that promise, given the ongoing questions—and threats—to higher education.

We also need to respond to the significant reductions in our state operating appropriations. In a few weeks, I will share the process that we'll use to develop a stable, long-term operating budget in light of those reductions.

We will engage in a process to prioritize financial investments in order to sustain our mission while identifying ways to do so more efficiently.

I recognize that this process may make some of you anxious.

I also recognize that some of you may wonder, given these challenges, why should you continue to do this work?

That's a fair question.

Whenever I am uncertain, I reflect on the lives of the people whom I had the good fortune to know—my personal heroes. Last year, I shared with you the story of my mentor, Michael Schwartz, whose memorial service I attended in February 2024.

Today, I want to tell you about Dr. Anna Ornstein, who died on July 2 at the age of 98.

Dr. Ornstein was a native of Hungary who became an internationally renowned psychoanalyst. After her death, the *New York Times* published a lengthy obituary about her work and her life.

Years ago, when I was in middle school, my family lived in Cincinnati. At that time, my father was the dean of the law school at the University of Cincinnati.

My best friend was Rafael Ornstein, Dr. Ornstein's son.

I was raised in a large Catholic family. The Ornstein family was Jewish.

When Dr. Ornstein was a teenager, she and her mother were sent to a Nazi concentration camp.

In her obituary, Dr. Ornstein was remembered for revealing a rather surprising detail in one of her papers. She shared that being tattooed at Auschwitz brought her "joy" because it meant that she would be assigned to forced labor, rather than being sent to a gas chamber.

The obituary also described how, at family seders, she would recount her experiences in the concentration camp.

I saw that brand on her arm. I attended a couple of those seders.

But what was most remarkable to me about Dr. Ornstein was her fundamental perspective on human psychology.

She disagreed with Freud's theory that people are motivated by primal instincts. Instead, Dr. Ornstein became famous for believing that people are driven by a desire for love and an instinct to help other people.

Pause for just a moment to reflect on that.

A woman who personally experienced the most horrible manifestation of evil as a young girl believed—she fervently believed—that evil can be overcome by hope and love. Hope and love.

I also find encouragement when I read about how other people find strength in difficult times—in the face of significant challenges.

A few months ago, I read an essay in the *New York Times* on the topic of fear that helped me answer the question that I asked a moment ago: “Why should we persist in our work?”

The essay was written by Stanley McChrystal, a retired Army general. He’s writing a forthcoming book titled *On Character: Choices That Define a Life*. There were two passages in his essay that struck me as pertinent to our predicament.

The first passage read: “Fear isolates. It pushes us into ideological bunkers, surrounding us only with those who think like us. And when fear festers, it mutates. What begins as anxiety turns into resentment. Resentment hardens into hatred. Hatred strips away our ability to see others as people. The result is a society driven by suspicion and hostility.”

The second passage read: “The strength of our character is not defined by the absence of fear but by our ability to face it, to rise above it and to live, and lead, with integrity. It is in these moments that we show the true measure of our resolve.”

The foundation of our collective resolve resides in the enduring value of our mission. We must persist, because our work is so meaningful. So important. In my estimation, the work that we do on this campus has never been as important as it is right now.

And my confidence and courage springs from my faith in all of you—our faculty and our staff. I embrace each day with hope and optimism, because I have the good fortune to serve you.

I know that our future is bright—that our best days are yet to come.

I know these things to be true, because I know you.

As you know, I end each convocation program with a musical performance. Before I introduce today’s performers, though, I need to share two things.

First, every year, this musical performance is arranged by Michael Rafter. We are so fortunate that, in 2019, Michael decided to become a full-time faculty member. But he still performs. In fact, in May, he made his debut with the New York Philharmonic leading musicians in a concert of Broadway favorites with Sutton Foster.

Second, when I started this tradition eight years ago, I asked Bill Jenkins and Michael to have our students perform a song of my choice. And every year since then, Bill and Michael—they’ve chosen a different song.

Once again this year, despite my unbroken record of failure, I recommended a specific song.

This time, my recommendation came with a story.

For Christmas, Gail gave me a book titled *The Small and the Mighty*. It's written by Sharon McMahon, a former high school teacher. This book is about 12 ordinary Americans whose lives changed our Nation's history.

One chapter was about Katherine Lee Bates.

Katherine, or Katie as she was better known, grew up in America in the late 1800s, at a time when women were denied many opportunities available to men.

Fortunately for Katie, she was admitted to one of the first classes at Wellesley College. A few years later, she returned to Wellesley to teach. But writing poetry was her real passion.

In 1893, Katie was among the 27 million Americans who attended the Chicago World's Fair. Katie was awestruck by our country's modern inventions.

As Katie continued her travels that Summer, she made it to Pikes Peak in Colorado. Getting up the mountain was difficult, but her reward was being struck by what she later described as "divine inspiration"—an urge so strong that she had to stop what she was doing and write a poem.

It took two years for her poem to reach the public. But when Katie's poem was finally published on July 4, 1895, our Nation was captivated by it. And in 1911, a Baptist minister decided to set its words to music. The song became an overnight sensation. The song is "America the Beautiful."

A few years later, when American soldiers in France were told that World War I was over, they walked out of the trenches singing "America the Beautiful."

In December 1941, when President Roosevelt was agonizing over our Nation's response to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, an anxious crowd of people gathered outside the White House. And they sang about a more hopeful vision of "spacious skies."

On November 27, 1963, in the wake of President Kennedy's assassination, President Johnson ended his first presidential address by asking Americans to "unite in those familiar and cherished words: 'America, America, God shed His grace on thee...'"

Over the course of her lifetime, Katie made just five dollars from "America the Beautiful." The poem, she said, was made possible by her older brother, Arthur.

Arthur had paid for Katie to go to Wellesley, and it was her college education that made her who she was. A college education.

Katie never sought fame or fortune. But as Sharon McMahon wrote: "What Katie did was—and is—important. Her words light the way of truth: our shared history as a Nation and the direction in which we should be heading."

Katie knew America wasn't perfect. It wasn't then. It isn't now.

But Katie believed in the power of poetry to remind Americans what it is they do love about America. Her words also remind us of our obligation to create a "more perfect union"—for all people ... from "sea to shining sea." That is Katie's enduring gift to us.

Reading about Katie's story inspired me. That's why I told Bill I wanted "America the Beautiful" to be this year's song.

Something remarkable happened: Bill agreed to have our students perform my selection!

So now, please welcome to the stage our talented musical theater students. They will be singing a medley of "America the Beautiful," written by Katherine Lee Bates, and "American Tune," written by Paul Simon, in an arrangement by Michael Rafter, who is also our pianist.