

CSUSM Convocation 2019

Thursday, August 22, 2019

President Ellen Neufeldt

Remarks as Prepared

Thank you, Kamel.

Since my first morning when I stepped off the elevator, I have felt your enthusiasm.

It's hard to believe it's only been two months since I arrived.

In that time, many of you have already invited me into your labs, offices, work spaces and conference rooms all over campus.

I still have so much to see but I want you to know it is an honor to be part of Cal State San Marcos as your fourth president.

September 1st is the 30th anniversary of our university.

Many of you know about our founding president, Dr. Bill Stacy.

In autumn of 1989, Dr. Stacy was given one year to hire the founding faculty members and lay the groundwork for our campus, academic mission and programs.

I too know Dr. Stacy!

Following his time here, he went on to become the chancellor of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

One of my first calls when I realized that I received this job was to Dr. Stacy and I will never forget our conversation.

We talked about how special this campus is.

He shared with me his vivid memory from 30 years ago, when he visited the site of where this campus would one day be.

At the time, a former chicken ranch.

But look at this vibrant place you have created together over the decades.

It has certainly exceeded the expectations set by Dr. Stacy and our founding faculty all those years ago.

Over the last three decades, our university has discovered and honed its voice, its place, and its mission.

Presidents Bill Stacy, Alexander Gonzalez and Karen Haynes – I know I'm standing on the backs of giants.

They each had their own vision – a vision so many of you were a part of.

Now its time to ask ourselves what the next 30 years will look like.

This is an exciting time. Look where we are now with our 306-acre campus, with state-of-the art facilities; over 16,000 students and 48,000 alumni.

As Kamel shared and as you saw in the video, I have been getting out to meet as many of you as possible on a Listening and Learning tour.

If we haven't connected yet, please know that I still have many places on campus that I look forward to visiting.

If you see me – walking across campus, please don't hesitate to say hello!

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on what we are doing well and where we can continue to grow and chart a course forward.

My first day, chemistry professors Jackie Trischman and Robert Iafe invited me into their laboratories so I could meet a few of the students participating in our signature Summer Scholars research program.

Their research is truly transformational.

Some of the students I met are:

- They are working to develop sensors that might one day transform cell phones into mobile microscopes to diagnose malaria in developing countries.
- And they are using chemistry to investigate the behavior of a local butterfly species whose population was largely destroyed in the recent wildfires.

I am so impressed by how their faculty mentors are nurturing them so that they can see themselves as researchers and scientists—part of the broader research community, both locally as well as globally.

I've been also impressed to learn about the breadth and scope of our faculty research in general.

This past fiscal year, we received **73** awards totaling **\$17.8** million dollars.

This is the highest number of annual awards received by our campus in history.

The range of research and variety of funding partners is remarkable.

Let me highlight just a few examples I've heard about – I look forward to meeting these faculty members and learning more.

With grants from National Geographic and the Russell Sage Foundation, Dr. Sasha Kimel, from Psychology is studying how results from at-home DNA tests change how users perceive their ethnic identity.

Dr. Nima Zaerpour from Operations and Supply Chain Management, with a grant from CSU Northridge, is studying vertical container ports as a solution for sustainable future oceanic transportation.

Dr. Gerardo Dominguez, from Physics, with funding from NASA, is working on research that is analyzing human space exploration and space science.

And Dr. Laurie Stowell from the School of Education, and with grants from the US Department of Education and the State of California, leads the San Marcos Writing Project.

I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Stowell at the Writing Project's Summer Institute last month.

Some of the regional K-12 teachers told me how about how the program is revolutionizing the way they are teaching, and their excitement about bringing back new strategies to the young students in their classrooms.

This makes me so excited because it's just one example of the bridges we are building.

And its yet another example of the local impact of our research that reverberates beyond our region to our state, nation and world, truly setting an example right here of how education can be taught nationally.

The work of our faculty doesn't exist in a vacuum.

What you are doing is creating links to our greater region and world, serving the public good.

I visited Facility Services, where I toured the shops and met those of you who so proudly maintain our campus from top to bottom.

I learned that we have citrus, avocado and even apple trees – and go to take some home... They were delicious!

I heard about dedicated staff including:

- Debbie Russo, in Distribution Services, who I'm told is a "behind-the-scenes hero" who ensures the careful handling of campus mail.
- Our custodial manager, Victor Chavez – who has a reputation for being extremely invested in and respected by his team ... and he's a proud alum as well!
- And, our electricians, including Michael Rosales, who are literally keep the lights on and the energy flowing.

They all make it look so easy, but there is hard work behind the scenes taking place.

Also on my first day, I joined our academic advisors for their kickoff celebration.

What I noticed immediately is that it's not JUST about the structure but about the individuals so dedicated to ensuring student success.

So many of you are showing me your commitment to our students and our culture of care.

I really saw this when I toured our University Student Union, visited Cougar Central, went on a campus tour with prospective students and families, and met many members of our talented Student Affairs team who support our students' success and their lifetime journey of growth and self-exploration.

For example, AVP for Student Life Gail Cole-Avent and staff from our social justice centers are focused on new strategies that will promote and enhance a vibrant student experience that speaks to the needs of our diverse student population.

All of these interactions have underscored to me that we are a campus of leaders who care deeply about our students.

Let me share a few more examples of what I'm talking about in this culture of care.

I was particularly touched to hear about general education writing faculty member, Professor Becky Tracey, who has an open-door policy where any of her students can stop by during office hours to make a sandwich and talk about writing or class content.

She wrote in her syllabus: "I understand how difficult it can be as a college student to be sure of where your next meal is coming from."

She offers students the chance to come to office hours for a free sandwich because a nourished body produces a nourished mind.

And then there is Marilyn McWilliams in the Office of Inclusive Excellence who approaches each day with kindness, love and passion. She enters every room with a bright smile and a hello for everyone there.

This past Friday I got to experience that for myself and I know she is genuinely interested in connecting with our students, faculty and staff, and moving our inclusive excellence initiatives forward.

I met Patty Diaz over the summer, and we took a selfie together when I toured the University Student Union!

I know many of you know her and will agree that she exemplifies what it means to lead from where you are.

Every student that she assists via the Cougar Care Network is provided with consistent care.

She is part of the team working to ensure that we are extending a safety net to any student who may be experiencing challenges in or outside the classroom.

Gail, Becky, Marilyn and Patty – each of them exemplifies our Culture of Care: an environment where everyone feels welcomed, included, affirmed.

An environment where everyone matters, and everyone belongs.

Last spring, I saw firsthand how you came together and showed a culture of care following the Chabad of Poway tragedy.

My heart was breaking for all of you.

Only a month later, I was walking with my former Old Dominion colleagues and students through the pain and sorrow of another mass shooting tragedy.

You see, the Virginia Beach shooter was an alumnus of ODU and five of the victims were also alumni.

And then there have been the horrific shootings this summer in Gilroy, El Paso and Dayton – and other violent attacks that have been motivated by identity-based hate.

Why am I talking about this in a speech that should be focused on our future and the excitement of a new academic year?

It's because it's important that we acknowledge the fact that Cal State San Marcos is now linked in this ongoing dialogue.

As a campus, a community, a nation, we've been through a lot.

These senseless acts of violence and hate are reprehensible and our collective resolve around community and diversity are being tested in great ways.

The fact that the Poway shooter was one of our own students. . . it's hard to imagine or fathom that someone who was a part of our campus community could even contemplate such hate and violence, much less act on it.

But I heard how you came together as a campus community to comfort and support each other. I can't erase the pain, but I can share with you my resolve.

This is a time for us to dig deeper in our commitment to social justice and inclusion.

How we respond and engage in caring for ourselves and those around us matters.

I thought about not mentioning this at all because I can't promise you that this will not happen again.

Unfortunately, no one can guarantee that.

I am committed to having the hard and inclusive conversations that lead us forward.

There is no other campus community I would want to do this work with on these tough issues.

It doesn't matter who you are, whomever you love, whatever you believe, or where ever you come from – you are welcome here!

I am humbled by this moment and you have my pledge that we will move our university forward with an ongoing commitment to social justice, equity and inclusion.

The principles of inclusive excellence have defined my career in my commitment to student social mobility, and they will continue to guide me and all of us as we write then next chapter of Cal State San Marcos.

I am partnering with Dr. Patricia Prado-Olmos and Dr. Marisol Clark-Ibanez to look at where we go next.

I invite you to lend your voice to this as well.

I know I have so much to learn.

I am determined to lead by example.

It is in this spirit that the vice presidents, chief of staff and I will be participating in the various campus cultural competency and ally educational programs, including a brand new one being developed related to the Black experience.

I've asked our senior managers to join us in this endeavor . . . and I invite all of you to be a part of this as well.

Together, ALL of us will chart the course for the change we wish to see in our greater society.

In light of this, many of you have also spoken to me about campus safety – that issue was front and center in a Faculty Senate resolution passed last spring.

I know we need to make sure that we have the best information and that are as prepared as possible.

To that end, I've asked Faculty Senate Chair Dr. Sharon Hamill and Interim Police Chief Lamine Secka to work together to review our current policies and practices.

Just this week, Chief Secka joined the Academic Senate campus safety meeting to discuss how we can create educational opportunities so that we can continue to prepare and respond to incidents that threaten our campus safety.

Dr. Hamill has already brought forward a great idea and, within the next month, you will soon see a safety guide posted inside every classroom door to provide an at-a-glance reminder of what to do in various emergency situations.

The University Police Department and Associated Students, Inc. are also planning to co-host a student seminar series, and UPD has committed to expand its community policing model to further engage our officers with our campus community.

Together, we will begin moving the needle forward with these initiatives because I know they are just too important to wait.

Today, I've mentioned many examples of leadership across our campus: individuals who are truly leading from where they are.

This is the essence of our campus.

I know that "leadership" is a word that is often overused or misused – but today I'm reclaiming it.

But when I think of true leadership, I think of all the heroes - the frontline, the unsung – who are helping our students become tomorrow's trailblazers.

Here, I believe that each of us has a place to lead, to dream, to innovate.

We ALL contribute to the success of our students.

Leadership doesn't come from a job title or from having a "take charge" personality.

It comes from a calling to see our students fulfill their dreams.

It comes from a desire to help our colleagues.

It comes from a sense that we are agile, positive, nimble, ethical, inclusive, civil and service-oriented from wherever we sit.

This is a campus of resourceful innovators and dreamers, communicators and educators, givers and leaders.

When I think about our work and our leadership, I can't help but think of my family of leaders, for whom I have enormous gratitude.

My grandparents immigrated to Canada and my father grew up on a farm but he always dreamed of going to college.

When I got the job offer here, I called two people.

First I called my supervisor and I told him, “Thank you so much, I wouldn’t be here without you.”

And then I called my dad and said, “Dad, thank you so much, I wouldn’t be here without you.”

I give my dad so much credit—and I know I have the privilege that he went to college—but my mom was the unsung hero of our household.

As my dad went through his academic career, my mother went to work to support him.

This was at a time when women working outside of the home to support their family was not widely supported – but it made a tremendous impression on both me and my sisters.

In fact, in meeting with groups like CSUEU – who demonstrated the great care they have about our campus and the individuals who work here – it reminded me of the behind-the-scenes, often unrecognized work of so many.

At the open forum in April, I shared how my father was a faculty member in the College of Education at Tennessee Tech University.

Well, my mother was an administrative assistant in the College of Engineering.

As she supported that department, she also interacted with, aided and encouraged many students.

I remember how she invited them into our home at Thanksgiving when they had nowhere else to go.

Our dinner table was always full.

And she cared about the female students who were at that time such a slim minority of the population in the department.

Although she may not have had the formal title, she certainly was a leader who made a mark on me.

She cared about student success even before higher ed coined the phrase, and she was the first to show me how to lead from where you are.

I’ve had the privilege of being surrounded by higher education my whole life.

When I graduated high school, I enrolled at Tennessee Tech where I earned a degree in Business Administration - Marketing.

When I graduated, I enthusiastically went to work in that field, but after a while noticed that something was missing for me.

I realized that I wanted to be a part of the higher education environment, and that academia was where my heart would always be.

I returned to Tennessee Tech for my Master's in Educational Psychology and Counselor Education.

And eventually I pursued my doctorate from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in Educational Administration and Policy Studies.

I am a second-generation college graduate, raised in a home with parents who were trailblazers and leaders.

They remind me of many of the people who work here – and our students as well.

I didn't always understand that growing up.

The education system worked for me – and for that I am enormously privileged and grateful.

I am also grateful because even today only 3 out of 10 university presidents nationally are women – and even fewer are single or divorced, as I am.

I am so grateful for a community who is embracing me for who I am, and I am thankful to add to the diversity of the 23 CSU presidents – 12 of whom are female.

In fact, Chancellor White let me know that with my hire, the CSU would remain a majority-female president institution. It is truly inspiring that the CSU—the largest public university in the nation—is taking the lead on this.

While I'm proud to be in the CSU, I am even prouder to be at Cal State San Marcos where we are sparking innovation, creativity and discoveries.

For example, just last week, I met Professor Judit Hersko who works in the intersection of art and science, collaborating with scientists at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography to help raise awareness of the serious impacts of climate change through art.

Dr. Toni Olivas, our Engagement and Inclusion Librarian, who has developed an ambassador program for our student centers to support our students' research while facilitating collaborations between the centers and the library—a terrific example of innovation and collaboration.

And I toured the Innovation Hub in our new Extended Learning Building with Professor Chuck DeLeone. He is leading an interdisciplinary committee of faculty who are considering the future of this space, dedicated to ideation, creation and exploration.

Innovation is not simply a proxy for technology - it's a philosophy for how we approach problems in new ways.

At the core of our mission is a commitment to innovation, to seeing issues through the eyes of different and diverse people.

I look forward to seeing how we can continue to nurture and encourage innovation on campus, particularly as we consider how innovation overlaps and positively impacts our commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Our university, our region and our world need our ideas and discoveries.

I know this idea of innovation is not new to you.

As I'm speaking with student leaders, faculty and staff, I'm hearing that innovation across the campus – from the classroom to faculty research – is important to you.

I hope that as we continue to chart a course for the future we will nurture a culture that provides the freedom to take risks and ask questions.

We will prioritize creating opportunities for people who, historically, have been denied the chance to pursue higher education.

We play a critical role in ensuring that voices and perspectives that have long been absent from the table are getting a chance to be part of the conversation and part of the solution.

That entrepreneurial spirit is one of the qualities that attracted me to CSUSM coupled with the values of access, inclusion and academic excellence.

I truly believe that what everyone does here matters – not just to this community or to our region or to our state, but to higher education nationally.

You are blazing the trail.

So many of our students have told me how much they appreciate their faculty, so dedicated to the Teacher-Scholar Model, who actively seek to get to know them personally, and see them as active participants in the learning process.

They also mention the staff who provide them mentorship, coaching and guidance – just like my mother did all those years ago.

Thanks to you, our students are thinkers and doers.

Their success is OUR success.

I believe that Cal State San Marcos is the embodiment of what the CSU system was created to be back when the California Master Plan for Higher Education was incorporated.

That Master Plan brought to fruition the still revolutionary idea that anyone should have the opportunity to attend college, work hard, learn new things, make positive change and set a course forward toward lifelong success.

Higher Education is often called out as having created the socio-economic divide in our country.

And in recent years there has been increased national attention on graduation rates. Because it isn't just about getting students TO our campus but THROUGH their studies to graduation and beyond.

Every one of us is part of the student life cycle, which embodies our collective efforts to serve students cohesively from their first point of contact through to graduation day when they become proud and engaged alumni.

As we begin the fall semester, I want you to think about your role in this interconnected work and keep our commitment to our students front and center.

We are all a part of the process. We all have a role.

It is how we work together – in a coordinated and complementary way – that supports our first-generation students, our veterans, our former foster youth, and every student who dreams of the opportunities that come with a college education.

With your innovative and entrepreneurial spirit, I know that we are on our way to becoming THE model of excellence not only in our system and state but nationally.

One thing that always excites me is talking about the social mobility of our students and the impact a degree can have, not just on the life trajectory of an individual student but the ripple effect it has for generations to come.

Last spring, there was a photo of an alumna, Erica Alfaro, that went viral on social media.

Erica, a first-generation student, graduated in 2017 and went on to earn her master's degree from San Diego State.

The viral photo shows Erica, in her cap and gown, standing with her parents in the middle of a strawberry field in Carlsbad.

From discovering that she was pregnant at age 15 to dropping out of high school to overcoming years of domestic violence, Erica conquered numerous challenges on a decade-long path to her degree.

Erica's is just one of the thousands of lives you've had an impact on these last 30 years.

Cal State San Marcos has grown beyond its infancy and its adolescence to a mature university – one that, at its core, has always been about and will always be about our commitment to our students.

Many of you have asked about my vision to usher us into the next 30 years.

My vision is inspired by students like Erica and the great work I've seen you do every day.

My vision is that we work together to build on our mission of social mobility and student success - through our innovative approach of engaged learning, partnering with our greater community.

My vision is that we chart this course together - becoming a national model of helping students throughout the student life cycle, from first point of contact through graduation to becoming active and engaged alumni in our community, fueling the needs of our region

My vision is that we will always build our programs and processes with the end-user in mind, from the student experience, to the faculty experience, to the staff experience to anyone who is part of our community.

My vision is that we are TOGETHER equipping the trailblazers of tomorrow who will lead a new day in our world through collaboration and inclusion.

You see, this vision is not just MY vision but OUR vision for how we will chart the next 30 years together.

We will build on the important work already completed and take it to new heights - through innovation, collaboration and inclusion.

We will become a model not only for our community but in the entire CSU system, our state and our nation to follow.

No longer will we be a hidden gem but a beacon of where the future of higher education is going.

We WILL lead the way together.