

The Prairie and the Possibilities

An All-University Address

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Good afternoon and thank you to each and every one of you for joining us today.

This is truly a special day for me. I not only have the privilege of addressing you, my colleagues, for the first time as President, but today we also welcome a new class of students to SMSU—students who have entrusted us with the privilege and great responsibility of transforming their lives over the course of the next several years.

I have spent my first six weeks on a whirlwind tour of this wonderful community and region. It has been a remarkable journey of listening and learning about the pride and passion that people have for SMSU, and hearing a constant message of optimism centered on the possibilities that we share. There is a growing desire from many constituents to partner and enhance the opportunities for our students while increasing the value that we *all* bring to this special region.

The rich history of this small college on the prairie is filled with countless experiences that have impacted the lives of so many people. These experiences were created in the classroom and in the labs, in the residence halls, on the athletic fields, on the stage, and throughout our communities.

The Southwest stories and experiences that have already been shared with me by recent graduates, retired teachers and university professors, successful CEO's, area farmers, writers, and local entrepreneurs have all carried similar messages. They are the same messages in the books I am reading on SMSU's history, messages that describe a history of path breakers, of being resilient and

entrepreneurial, of an institution that is committed to making our mark and creating our own future.

We have before us tremendous opportunities; countless possibilities that we can build together. The community that has been created at SMSU will enable us to determine what our future will be. It is a community and culture filled with creativity, tenacity, spirit, and foresight that will help us develop a shared vision and meet the inherent responsibilities that accompany that vision.

My visits and conversations across the region almost always lead off with the same question of those I am visiting with. They ask, “What is your vision for SMSU?”

Today, I would like to share with you *my* initial answer to that question and then challenge you to help answer it as well.

I envision SMSU being a University focused on three key themes:

- Academic Excellence and Distinctiveness
- Student Learning and Success
- Meaningful Partnerships and Engagement

In my short time at the University, I have quickly become acquainted with a number of examples of **Academic Excellence and Distinctiveness**.

The incredible Undergraduate Research Conference that has grown on this campus among many disciplines; the national award-winning Culinary students; the early practicum program in education for aspiring teachers; the success of SMSU communications students in national Forensics competition; and the explosion of interest in Exercise Science and health and wellness - these are just a few illustrations that speak to Academic Excellence and Distinctiveness and are

the base for our Southwest stories that create the fabric of the themes I have laid out today.

I have high expectations that we will work together to author *more* of these stories and provide significant life changing experiences for our students and others.

However, the humility and modest nature of this campus—while very genuine and enduring— as to be overcome in order to share these great stories; we must be *proud* and share our accomplishments with others and not be afraid to tell others how good we are.

I have a few questions for us to consider: What are we as an institution known for? What do we *want* to be known for? What is it that we do well? Where are the opportunities to distinguish ourselves?

I also want to challenge all of us to consider our core responsibility to the students who have given us their trust and invested their future with us. What does that mean for each of us? What role does each of us play in shaping the experiences of our students?

We are all educators and every one of us has an impact on the learning environment we create at SMSU. It's important that we challenge our students to explore new ideas, theories, concepts; that we challenge them to dream big, to set high goals, and work hard to achieve them; and we challenge our students to truly change lives for the better.

My new home here in Marshall is surrounded by a beautiful cornfield this year. It has been an amazing few months watching that field transform itself from the barren ground when I first looked at the home to this towering canvas that shapes the landscape today.

Being able to watch the sunrise and sunset for the first time in many years across these prairie fields makes it easy to dream about how we can transform lives at the University. And I ask, “Where do our possibilities for academic excellence and distinctiveness lie?”

The next theme, Student Learning and Success, should be at the center of what we do here.

As some of you know, my first visit to SMSU was not during the search process, but instead the previous summer, when I was invited to share my experience with assessment and student learning. It was a beautiful day and the campus sparkled.

From the moment I first stepped foot on campus, I was delighted that nearly everywhere I looked on this campus, one is greeted by visual art. Paintings and sculpture in nearly every building. And of excellent quality. Much of it by student artists.

In the past couple of weeks, the hallway on the second floor of Founders Hall, where my office is, was painted and all of the artwork was taken down. The walls were bare and the environment became very sterile. We all remarked on the difference. We sorely missed the color, the patterns, the energy, the beauty, the inspiration that had surrounded us every day.

The art that surrounds us at SMSU is a great metaphor for what we do here. Every day. In fact, it’s at the core of what we do. Something so pervasive and innate that we sometimes take it for granted.

Simply put: *We change lives.* We provide an environment in which students gain knowledge and skills that greatly enhance the quality of *their* lives and the quality of *our* lives. Forever.

Some of our students will create beautiful, meaningful pieces, and if we're lucky, we will get to hang them on our walls or display the pieces as lasting reminders of the growth of our students' creativity, inventiveness, and positive energy. *All* of our students leave here better prepared to make an impact on their communities and on the world, whether through their art, with their voices, or their skills as scientists, business leaders, teachers, writers, culinologists or social workers—the whole range of richness our academic community provides.

I ask everyone today to reflect on *your* most meaningful educational experience. What experience do you remember with great fondness? What did it mean to you? How did that experience shape you? How did it change your life?

There are dozens of opportunities we offer students that range from undergraduate research, residential life programming, athletic competition, theatre performance, to civic engagement projects—all of these are important and all of these enhance the educational experience of students.

Everyone has a role in shaping student experiences at SMSU and each of us has the ability to help our students make intentional choices. To help our students “*learn*” from every experience. The guidance we provide can transform the lives of our students and we never know when that one most meaningful experience will occur in their lives.

The last theme that I have lifted up is that of **Meaningful Partnerships and Engagement**.

There is a desire across this region to see our academic programs grow, to have our graduates remain in the region, to engage our faculty and students in meaningful research and problem solving, and an eagerness to share and celebrate in the success of our fine University.

I want to challenge all of us to lift up the “*Southwest*” in Southwest Minnesota State University. Look across the broad prairie landscapes and the long horizons and think about how we can be responsible and responsive to our region. Consider how we can make a difference *where we live*.

Our graduates have the highest employment rates in the MnSCU system and our graduates are accepted to some of the finest graduate schools in the country; our alumni giving rate is the highest of any public institution in Minnesota; our faculty and staff giving rate is among the highest in the system; and our student athletes have been recognized by the NCAA with the Civic Engagement Award. These are all indicators that we are doing things well and people recognize it.

So, how can we do more and do it in a manner that provides a mutual benefit to our students as well as to the Southwest Region?

I was at Farmfest a couple of weeks ago up by Redwood Falls and had the opportunity to speak with agricultural leaders from both state agencies as well as graduates of our Minnesota Ag and Rural Leadership (MARL) program. The message was very clear: SMSU has a history of being successful when taking on new initiatives and has always shown a willingness to work with others. We identify a need and we help find a solution to meet that need. We are dreamers *and* we are doers.

We must capitalize on what we do well, we must be inventive and creative, and we must work collaboratively with others to grow our academic programs, to identify the resources we need to deliver those programs, and most importantly to deliver an even greater return on investment to the students who have entrusted their future with us.

Creating meaningful partnerships will help us grow as an institution, and it will help us recruit and retain our students. Creating these partnerships will provide our students with opportunities to become engaged citizens and future leaders for this region of the state and beyond. It will help transform their lives and the lives of others.

Academic Excellence and Distinctiveness, Student Learning and Success, and Meaningful Partnerships and Engagement: our goal together is to lift up these messages, to share the Southwest stories that define each of these themes and grow the possibilities that exist within them.

There will be challenges along the way; there is no doubt about that. The financial resources will always be a challenge as the public investment in education shifts and as new delivery methods challenge traditional forms.

As you may know, I was born and raised in Cando North Dakota, where the town motto painted on the side of Bob's Super Value is: You Can Do Better in Cando. Our challenge at SMSU is to focus and carry on that same "can do" attitude and continue to demonstrate the same Southwest resiliency and entrepreneurial spirit that we have shown for 46 years.

We must focus on the recruitment of new students and the retention of current students. Students have many choices these days and many of them joining us have already accumulated some form of college credit prior to their enrollment on campus. It's important to ensure that the experiences that they have at SMSU are relevant and meaningful.

I challenge you to keep our students engaged, to be collaborative with others to enhance *their* experience as well as your own, and then share those examples so that others can model the experiences that have added value to our students and strategic partners. Our goal is to be the *first choice* of our students.

As we begin a new academic year, please also remember to keep this in mind: every student on our campus needs someone who is “their rock,” someone they can turn to no matter the situation or problem, someone who can give them the guidance they need.

Each and every one of us on this campus is an educator, and I ask all of us to reach out and be that “rock” to help guide our students and show them the possibilities.

In closing, I would like to share with you a brief passage from a collection of essays written by the late Bill Holm, who taught at SMSU for many years and was a person who many consider to be one of this region’s and this state’s true literary lights.

As Mr. Holm states in his essay, *Horizontal Grandeur*:

There are two eyes in the human head – the eye of mystery, and the eye of harsh truth – the hidden and the open – the woods eye and the prairie eye. The prairie eye looks for distance, clarity and light; the woods eye for closeness, complexity and darkness.

The prairie is endless! [...] flat dry, empty, lit by brilliant sunsets and geometric beauty. Prairies like mountains, stagger the imagination most not in detail, but in size. As a mountain is high, a prairie is wide; horizontal grandeur, not vertical.

Like a long symphony [...] the prairie unfolds gradually, reveals itself a mile at a time, and only when you finish crossing it do you have any idea of what you’ve seen.

If prairie size moves the imagination, delicacy moves the heart. People neglect prairies as scenery because they require time and patience to comprehend.

And then, he goes on with some of my favorite lines: “A woods man [or a woods woman] looks at twenty miles of prairie and sees nothing but grass, but a prairie man [or prairie woman] looks at a square foot and sees a universe...”

So I ask this of all of us: Let us embrace *our* prairie eye and imagine the many possibilities that we have before us. Let us build a bright future and let us do this together.

I look forward to working alongside you and getting to know each and every one of you as we embark on this journey together.

Thank you for welcoming me into the SMSU family.

Thank you for your kind attention.

“Horizontal Grandeur” by Bill Holm was published in *The Music of Failure* (Prairie Grass Press, 1990; University of Minnesota Press, 2010.). Copyright by Bill Holm.