

Good afternoon and thank you to each and every one of you for joining us here today. It is great to see familiar faces and welcome everyone to the 2014-15 academic year!

As I stood in this same spot one year ago talking about “The Prairie and the Possibilities,” I had no idea that together we would have such an exciting year or that we would accomplish all that we accomplished last year.

I offer a heartfelt thank you to *everyone* for making my first year so memorable and meaningful.

Today, I would like to take a look back on last year and what we accomplished; and I would like to look forward to this year and the opportunities that lie ahead of us.

A Brief Recap of 2013-14 (though not an exhaustive list):

- We welcomed 441 new freshmen to campus last fall with the news that SMSU was ranked as the top MnSCU University for return on investment for its graduates and that our new graduate employment rate had risen to 99%.
- Twenty one graduate students from Taiwan joined us to earn their MBA degrees.
- We launched the RN to BSN nursing program with 42 students taking courses last year.
- We re-dedicated the Schwan Regional Event Center.
- We worked diligently to prepare the Self-Study for the Higher Learning Commission.
- Some of you were a part of reviewing our All-University committee structure and a number of you served on the revitalized Strategic Planning Committee.
- We broke ground on the new Marshall Regional Track and Field Complex.

- Nearly everyone was a part of a wonderful Inauguration week that helped celebrate the prairie, the people and the possibilities.

Thank you!

Last year, I challenged us to envision a University focused on three key themes:

- Academic excellence and distinctiveness;
- Student learning and success; and
- Meaningful partnerships and engagement.

Those three themes were essential in providing a lens to guide us as we looked to advance, to grow and to tackle tough decisions.

As a campus community we faced the projected budget deficit with focus and a sense of urgency. We collaborated across the University. We held All-University meetings and planning sessions in which we discussed the issues and sought creative solutions to our budget situation.

We applied a five-part test to our considerations and the result was a set of strategies and actions that helped position the University to survive in the short-term and thrive in the long-term.

Over the summer many of you have worked hard to keep the momentum going. Our summer session enrollment numbers were strong this year and we are very pleased to report that we are officially launching a new major this year!

In Spring 2015, we will offer a major in Ag Education, an area where job opportunities outnumber graduates three to one and where many students leave the state because they cannot get in to programs here in Minnesota. We have already raised over \$100,000 to support this program and we are confident that others will make investments to get the program off the ground.

We are nearing substantial completion of the new Marshall Regional Track and Field Complex, a wonderful partnership between SMSU and the Marshall School District, supported and funded by our students and the School District. This 2.8-million-dollar project is already helping attract new students and events to campus.

The new University Entrance Sign Project is well underway. A generous matching gift of \$100,000 from alumna Deeann Griebel is helping raise roughly \$250,000 to create a signature gateway not only to the campus, but also the community of Marshall. Very soon the new fountain will be installed, which is one of the key elements of the project donated by the City of Marshall.

Last year through the SMSU Foundation, we awarded nearly \$740,000 in scholarships and raised another \$1.5 million in new scholarship dollars in addition to many other fundraising projects.

Our alumni giving rate was once again the *highest of any public institution in the state of Minnesota*, and our *faculty and staff giving rate increased to 52%*. That's wonderful! I challenge all of *you to help make that 100%*!

Every single member of the SMSU community—including teaching faculty, service faculty, staff members, students, supporters of the University, local and area businesses, and alumni/ae— have helped make these achievements possible and I applaud you for all your good work.

Over the past twelve months we experienced a number of firsts together: we welcomed new members to the SMSU community and we celebrated births; we grieved the loss of family, friends, and some members of our extended SMSU family. Through it all we held tight to the values and principles that make us a strong community.

How did we both survive the challenges and find a way to thrive? What is it about the SMSU community that inspires us to persevere?

We are successful when we face challenges together; when we take a positive solutions-oriented approach to addressing issues; and when we focus on the greater good and making a difference.

Time and again I have seen examples when we don't just talk about what we want to do or what needs to be done; we get busy and we make things happen.

There is no question about it: we are dreamers *and* we are doers.

And, we also know that *we are the architects of our future*. What goals we accomplish and what heights we reach are up to us. To paraphrase Henry Ford, "If you think you can, or you think you can't— you are right." I prefer to focus on

what *is* possible. Our future is in our hands and it is dependent on our collective efforts.

So, as we look to what is ahead this next year, we will be laying the foundation for our future. No doubt it will be a busy year for the SMSU community.

Among our main priorities in 2014-15 will be:

- Strategic Planning, Phase 2: All-University Strategic Planning Committee will focus on developing a coordinated plan that pulls together an Academic Plan; a Diversity Plan; an Enrollment Management plan; a Campus Master Facilities Plan; and a specific commitment to developing our institutional capacity and effectiveness - an institution that is nimble and flexible; an institution that is continually learning and growing. All with our overarching three themes working in alignment with our mission and vision.

- Accreditation: We will welcome visitors to campus for the Nursing Program on October 15-17 and the HLC accreditation visit will be the following week on October 20-22.

- We will have some personnel changes this year: We welcome Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Success, Allan Vogel. We will hire an Interim Provost/Vice President for Academic & Student Affairs to begin in Spring 2015. And we will hire a “permanent” Provost to begin in July 2015.

- We will deepen partnerships with regional, state, and global entities.

- And we will address our institutional metrics, specifically:
 - Retention and Completion rates
 - Achievement gap in completion
 - Successful transfer of credits
 - Diversity of both students and employees
 - Composite Financial Index (CFI)
 - Space utilization

Our mission is to educate students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. We prepare students to meet the complex challenges of this century as engaged citizens in their local and global communities. Our comprehensive degree programs, taught in the liberal arts tradition, are dedicated to connecting students' academic and practical professional development experiences in southwestern Minnesota to the wider world.

Our vision is to be a university of choice.

We pursue our mission and vision through the values that guide us –individually and collectively– as a community. We will be engaging in some exercises in the next month to help us identify our top values as we work on imagining what's possible and consider how our dreams can come alive.

What kinds of things might we consider? What would it feel like to be a part of this? What would the student experience consist of?

As we build our future together, I ask that we enhance what we already do well, that we build on our strengths and our values.

Consider what it would mean to be:

- A university community where everyone is welcome and valued; where we celebrate our differences as well as our similarities; where we honor different traditions and are eager to learn about one another - whether we had just met the person or we had known them for years. In a respectful environment with civil, considerate interactions across the entire campus. Where all members of our community find meaning and joy in what they do, whether they are paid hourly or earn an annual salary.

Consider what it would be like to guarantee:

- A student experience that is truly holistic in nature. One that is marked by learning and reflection in the classroom as well as *outside* the classroom – literally in all aspects of a student's life. An experience that includes active and collaborative learning including an internship (or two) and other meaningful experiential opportunities. Where students work on “real

world problems” that bring their coursework to life and help make meaning out of the conceptual and abstract. Where each student identifies their goals and dreams and has a personalized 4-year academic plan that provides a pathway for them to follow. Where students work on projects that span a semester or two to complete. Where students connect with alumni and friends of the University well before they graduate and make important connections for their future study, work, and leadership.

Consider what it would feel like if:

- We were a university community committed to continuous learning. Where we learn from every situation; where there were no such things as “mistakes” because we learn from every experience; where we are not afraid to take risks - risks that could have great rewards! Where every member of our University community is actively engaged in building our future. Where each of us plays a role in creating an innovative, nimble, dynamic place to be. Where we intentionally grow our institutional capacity through personal and professional growth for all our members.

Consider what it would mean to our campus environment if:

- We engage in stimulating conversations and exchanges all across campus on a regular basis; a place where our discussions challenge our assumptions and where we each seek a broader view of the world. An environment that is innovative and adaptable, where entrepreneurs from near and far seek us out to test their products and help them develop new prototypes. Where undergraduate research is the norm across all of our programs; an environment where we provide enriching experiences and professional development opportunities for every member of our community.

Consider how it would position us as an institution if:

- We were the *first* university that students thought of attending. Where we are known far and wide for the distinctiveness of our academic programs and the quality of the student experience. Where prospective students

equate attending SMSU with challenging, enriching experiences, success after they graduate, and the lifelong friends they will make. Where 80% of our students return for their sophomore year. Where all students – whether artist or athlete, young or old, first generation or legacy, rural or urban – from all cultures, proudly share their Southwest Story with their family and friends declaring Southwest as the *best* decision they ever made.

This year, I want to challenge all of us to focus on engagement... engagement on multiple levels.

First is to become engaged in our local communities. I think we all have a civic responsibility to become a part of our local communities, our schools, service organizations, churches and fellowships— whatever our faith tradition.

I want people to know that SMSU employees care about the community they live in, that they represent SMSU with pride and that SMSU is not only a great place to get a quality education, but a great place to work.

Second, I want to challenge us to become even more engaged with our students, in the classroom and outside the classroom.

As stated in a recent Association of American Colleges and Universities article: “There is clear evidence that deeper student engagement in learning leads to higher rates of persistence and completion.” (Judith Ramaley, 2013).

And a recent Gallup-Purdue study found that support and experiences in college had more of a relationship to long term workplace engagement and well-being for college graduates than where or what type of institution they attended.

Having a professor who cared about them as a person, who made them excited about learning and encouraged them to pursue their dreams *more than doubled* their odds of being engaged at work and their odds of thriving in *all aspects* of their well-being.

And graduates who had an internship or job in college where they were able to apply what they were learning in the classroom, were actively involved in extracurricular activities and organizations, and worked on projects that took a semester or more complete – had the same outcome – their odds of being engaged at work doubled as well. (Ray and Kafka, 2014)

Our further engagement with students can make all of the difference not only for them, but also for our communities *and* the University.

We have an excellent freshmen/first-year class starting this fall with the numbers approaching 470 new freshmen students. A special thank you to everyone who helped move the new students into their residence halls today. It was wonderful to have so many SMSU folks and community members welcoming new students and families to campus.

We also have approximately 150 new transfer students.

We have made good progress in our persistence rate: the first-year to sophomore retention, which has typically been around 67-68%, also looks to have increased with roughly 71% of our first-year freshmen students returning for their sophomore year.

In addition, whereas last year we entered 21 students from Taiwan, this week we are welcoming 39 Taiwanese students who are at SMSU to earn their MBA degrees.

More students are living in our residence halls this year as well. At last count, we have 902 students registered for on-campus housing—up from 837 last year at this time—which is exactly what we want: more students living on campus!

So, let's keep that momentum going! Let's engage our students in their learning in the classroom as well as beyond. Let's encourage our students to become involved in campus clubs and organizations. Let's become engaged in the community ourselves. Let's encourage others to be engaged as well.

Let's deepen our connections and meaningful partnerships to maximize our collective strengths, resources, and talents.

And together we will build a bright future for SMSU.

Thank you.

Works Cited

- Ramaley, J.A. (2013) Seeking More High Quality Undergraduate Degrees: Conditions for More Effectively Working with the Policy Makers. Peer Review, Winter 2013, Vol. 15 (1). <http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/seeking-more-high-quality-undergraduate-degrees-conditions-more>
- Ray, Julie and Kafka, Stephanie (2014) Life in College Matters for Life After College: New Gallup-Purdue study looks at link among college, work, and well-being. www.gallup.com, May 6, 2014. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/168848/life-college-matters-life-college.aspx>