

## ONE LAST TIME

DSU State of the University Address • John M. Hilpert, President

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Ten times now I have stood in this spot at this occasion to talk about this university – its mission, its opportunities, its challenges, and its accomplishments. This one last time seems somehow momentous in my mind, but I know it is just because of the life change coming for Pat and me. What is one last time for me is just another time for the university where changes happen all the time. People come and go. Technologies come and go quickly, while buildings come and go at a more leisurely pace. Even the basic capital of our enterprise – knowledge – comes and goes, or at least evolves. This progression is the human experience, and it is what makes a career in higher education so engaging.

By the time we reach the actual day of my retirement – defined by the governing board as the end of the calendar year or whenever after January 1 the new president arrives – many of us in this room will have spent nearly a decade of our professional lives together. Others have joined us along the way. That's not a particularly long time as contrasted with the three Delta State presidents who spent more years in this office, but it is long enough that we've gotten to know one another – sometimes for the better and sometimes not so much. We've had enough time to get things done, and highlights of those things will be the principal focus of this address. We're going to look back together and celebrate our significant accomplishments one last time.

You have done a lot during a period that unfortunately ranks among the most difficult in the history of public higher education, both in Mississippi and across the nation. More than five years of a depressed economy have exacted a toll. As state revenues suffered, so did public

universities here and elsewhere. Reductions in state appropriations meant deep budget cuts on the campuses, not once or twice, but year after year. The federal mood soured, and that meant even more reductions as earmarks disappeared and financial aid programs eroded. Tuitions increased. Positions were lost, and facility needs were delayed or ignored. Perhaps worst of all, good ideas had to be shelved for better days to come.

So stressful has this period been, that since I arrived in 2003 there have been five different individuals with the title Commissioner or Interim Commissioner leading Mississippi's public university system. Also among the eight universities, there have been 25 people who have held the title President, Interim President, or Chancellor. That's a lot of turn-over.

Now it is my turn to hand off this job to number 26 in the system, or maybe number 27 if the search at the University of Southern Mississippi goes more quickly. Very soon this campus will be completely absorbed by the politics and rumors of a presidential search. While the process is underway, no one will think much about what happened in the recent past. So, this is the best moment for me to say thanks to all of you for what you have accomplished during my years on the campus.

Most importantly, since 2003 we have awarded 8,259 degrees. Seventy percent of those degrees have gone to undergraduate students and 30 percent to graduate students. Few other regional universities – none in Mississippi – have that percentage of graduate activity, and it is both a mark of the quality of this institution and a pillar of the academic strength of our curriculum. A goal has been to award over 800 degrees each year, and the average has been 826, a performance that shows the commitment of the faculty and the staff to the success of our students. Thank you, and congratulations on making a difference in so many lives.

Thank you, also, for the moments when you reached out as a campus community – frequently working with our neighbors in Cleveland – to help others, often strangers. I think of the shipments of relief supplies to tornado victims and the collections for toys or food at holidays. Especially I recall the weeks of work to help refugees from Hurricane Katrina. You volunteered to register and give medical attention. You cleaned spaces on campus for housing. You prepared food and used technology to find lost relatives and prepare maps for first responders. Again, you made a difference.

Even as the nation and the state experienced economic woes, our years together have seen significant changes in the bricks-and-mortar of the campus. You might be surprised at the long list of new facilities completed since 2003: Kent Wyatt Hall, the Dorgan Center, the Thigpen Annex, the Crawford Building, Foundation Hall, University Apartments, the Central Mechanical Plant, additions to Caylor-White-Walters and the School of Nursing, a second hanger at the aviation facility, the half-mile lighted walking track, and a new classroom building at the Coahoma Higher Education Center. In addition, we worked with the City of Cleveland to construct a new fire station near the airport.

Of special note is the Hazel and Jimmy Sanders Sculpture Garden that has become the focal point for the creative and visual arts on the campus and vaulted Delta State into the position of presenting more public sculpture than any other campus in Mississippi. One more funded project is making its way through the bureaucracy, that is, Statesmen Boulevard, a roadway between Highway 8 and the athletic complex.

Some facility developments were major renovations: Jobe Hall, Kethley Hall, the Whitfield Gymnasium that became the Delta Music Institute, the south side of campus where out-dated structures were removed and parking lots were created, the H. L. Nowell Student

Union's retail sales area, new scoreboards at all athletic venues, and the wireless and smart classroom technologies across campus. One significant interior renovation project is still in progress, namely, Caylor-White-Walters. Well into the planning process are renovations of Ward Hall, Zeigel Hall, and the H. L. Nowell Student Union. There are also plans to demolish and remove four out-dated student residence halls and the student family housing units west of the cafeteria.

It is a different and more accommodating campus for students, faculty, staff, and the public today than it was in 2003. Thank you to everyone who played a role in these improvements.

No one would have guessed a decade ago that Delta State would host Summer Training Institutes for Teach For America but that is exactly what happened beginning with a competitive process in 2009. We won the opportunity to be the eighth and only rural site, as well as one of the largest institute sites. All other institutes are located in major urban centers, yet Delta State gets outstanding marks for the quality of its facilities and services from TFA staff and new corps members alike. We have now hosted for three summers and expect to continue working with Teach For America for many years into the future. This commitment requires the effort of many on the campus. Thank you for this success that has done much to raise the visibility of our institution across the state and around the nation. Even more importantly, this institutional effort has brought significant advantages to K-12 education in the Mississippi Delta.

What else have we done together? There is expanded shared governance. Since my arrival, the President's Cabinet has included as full voting members the Faculty Senate President and a representative of the Academic Council. Time and again, their contributions have been irreplaceable.

Also during these years:

- We successfully crossed all hurdles related to our regional accreditation, including our ten-year reaffirmation, our Quality Enhancement Plan, and our fifth-year report.
- We surpassed a \$35 million capital fund drive goal in 2005, and according to DSU Foundation figures, since that success, our external fund raising from private and public sources, including all gifts and grants, has topped \$80 million. Annual grant amounts grew from \$3 million in 2000 to more than \$13.9 million in 2010.
- We served more than two dozen K-12 school districts with upper division instruction from e-learning studios on our campus, a project supported and funded annually by the Mississippi Legislature.
- We further developed an existing cohort-based educational leadership program, and it was named by Stanford University as one of eight programs of excellence across the nation. Also, the United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, cited it in a speech as an outstanding program in an unexpected location.

Thanks to all who made those things happen and worked to sustain them.

Then there is the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area. This may be somewhat less well known on the campus, but it is an institutional achievement that required years of effort and has the potential to bring tremendous good to this region of our state. Seven years of work with individuals, Delta communities, statewide organizations, federal programs, and congressional offices were required. Our Delta Center identified the opportunity in 2003 and led the drive to craft legislation that passed the United States Congress designating these 18-counties as the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area. Now the United States Department of Interior recognizes this as a unique location with a significant history contributing to the cultural legacy

of our nation. It is regularly advertised in federal publications, and just as with the national parks, there are many people who plan travel to see America's most important heritage areas.

We expect to see annual federal appropriations to help with tourism and preservation, as well as scholarly projects related to this special place. There is a regional board working to build a meaningful plan for further development. Again, our Delta Center is serving a pivotal role as the managing entity for the National Heritage Area. There is an important future for this effort. Thanks to Luther Brown and everyone else who played a part in this achievement.

In a similar vein, the success in attracting the Grammy Museum to Cleveland is the result of partnerships within the community and across the Delta. This university is one of the partners. Our participation – particularly through our Delta Music Institute – is important to the success of the project. We are proud that Cleveland was selected as the host community, and we are pleased to participate in planning the museum's future along with community leaders. Thanks to all who are making the Grammy Museum happen and who continue to work toward its realization.

As to another area of our campus life, several new traditions related to commencement have begun during these years:

- We look forward to a Kossman Award winner from the faculty speaking at each December ceremony.
- Graduates enjoy the symbolism of faculty forming reception lines at the end of each ceremony to greet and congratulate all who earned degrees.
- We award honorary doctoral degrees each spring to distinguished individuals whose accomplishments and contributions merit special recognition. Honorary degrees are new to Delta State since 2003, and we have recognized several outstanding people, including

the Delta's own international movie personality, Morgan Freeman, and the Mississippian who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, Natasha Trethewey.

The Academic Division was also the primary player in the following:

- We created the Center for Global Information Systems where contracts for service extend worldwide, and faculty and students have helped with mapping for the Obama Inauguration, as well as Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake disaster.
- We named the Robert E. Smith School of Nursing and the Thad Cochran Center for Rural School Leadership in honor of two men who have made a difference to this institution and its students.
- We opened the Delta Music Institute, a program that has grown in reach and enrollment each year of its existence. Musical groups from DMI have performed far and wide, just this summer by invitation in Chicago. The DMI has its own record label. Now the program includes a mobile recording lab to introduce children in the region's K-12 schools to both this industry and the heritage of the Mississippi Delta in American music.

Thank you to all in the Academic Division who designed, promoted, and engineered these and other positive curricular developments.

Diversity is one area where I want to promote the achievements of the university community, but at the same time I want to encourage further and expanded efforts. Throughout my years at Delta State, we have proudly laid claim to being the most diverse public university in Mississippi. We've recognized this important characteristic, talked about it, and even celebrated it with several events. One of the highlights for me in recent years was the return of the African-American students who in the early days of the civil rights movement protested here on campus. As a result, they were taken for a time to Parchman Penitentiary. It was important to remember

the event and even more important to embrace those alumni as change agents in the history of Delta State University. Georgene Clark has served as our Diversity Coordinator and worked with a dedicated task force on surveys, campaigns, educational programs, and celebratory events. I really appreciate their extraordinary efforts.

However, Delta State has an opportunity to go beyond, to become a leader in the national conversation regarding higher education and diversity. Frankly, we have not realized our full potential, yet it remains a worthy goal. Few other institutions are blessed with the rich mix of students we have on our campus. We had hoped to appoint a full-time Chief Diversity Officer and to enhance the diversity of faculty and staff as important steps in our progress. These are gains I hope each of you will strive to bring to the university in the years ahead.

Here is a list of a few additional developments of the past several years I think are significant:

- We worked hard as a community to achieve energy efficiency, and now we are saving more than \$1 million per year in spending for electricity and natural gas.
- We managed the budget effectively through the difficult times. We ended fiscal years in balance and consistently achieved a bond rating of “A” from Standard & Poors.
- We successfully outsourced basic campus services – the Bookstore, Food Services, and Technology Management. We are pleased with the cost savings and the effectiveness of our partnerships with Barnes & Noble, Aramark, and Ellucian.
- We sought greater public awareness of Delta State, and the recent, very innovative “Fear the Okra” campaign has won both awards and attention for the university. We also hosted an annual conference of the Mississippi Association of Colleges, two meetings of the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, and several



other conferences and meetings that showed off the hospitality and quality of our university.

- We won recognition from the Southern Regional Education Board as one of fifteen public colleges and universities nationwide outperforming most similar institutions in promoting and maintaining a culture of student success.
- We achieved the designation “Tree Campus USA” awarded by the National Arbor Day Foundation and we are the only campus in Mississippi currently so recognized.
- We’re the first and only public university in the state to adopt and enforce a tobacco-free policy. It was part of the Healthy Campus/Community Initiative that has also been highly successful for us.

Thanks to everyone who helped with these achievements.

No recitation of success for a Delta State University president would be complete without a nod toward Intercollegiate Athletics. Everyone knows that the Statesmen are year-in-and-year-out one of the finest NCAA II programs in the country. There is an expectation of success, and we have been fortunate to attract coaches, players, and athletic administrators who work hard to meet competitive goals. The 2004 national championship in baseball is unquestionably the athletic highlight of my years here, but our teams in several sports regularly took us deep into the national tournaments. There was not one year without regional or national playoff excitement, and as a fan, I am grateful.

Let me also say I am thankful for the personal opportunities I have had to serve as Chair of the SACS Commission on Colleges, the Delta Health Alliance, the Mississippi Association of Colleges, and the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area. My gratitude is for opportunities to contribute to the work of these wonderful organizations, for the outstanding reputation of Delta

State University that added to my appeal as a candidate for these appointments or elections, and for governing board members who permitted this service and colleagues who understood and offered support when I was absent from the campus for these duties.

Finally, we have enjoyed the idea that arose in 2005 to celebrate a theme each academic year. We have celebrated the Year of Cleveland, the Year of Health and Wellness in the Delta, the Year of Delta Heritage, the Year of Partnerships, the Year of the Arts, the Year of Green, and, most recently, the Year of the Student. Each theme has given focus to annual programming. We have had opportunities to present awards keyed to the themes to people on the campus and in the region. We have even seen creative developments from one or another of our yearly celebrations that have become part of the ongoing life of the campus. Thanks to everyone who has made this idea so successful, particularly those who have taken the task of managing one or another of our annual observances.

I am excited to announce the new theme for the 2012/13 academic year. It will be: the Year of Service. Our programming will focus on service to the university and service by the university, including emphases on voluntarism, financial support, and special service project opportunities. Emily Jones and Christy Riddle have agreed to provide leadership for the Year of Service. Thanks to them for taking on this big job.

This being officially billed as a “State of the University Address,” I feel obliged to convey what has been my annual message: the state of Delta State University is sound. The institution was delivered to me in good condition in 2003, and as we reach 2013, I will pass a healthy university to my successor as well. We’ve faced challenges, seized opportunities, and made gains. Have we reached the goal we set for ourselves of becoming the Best Regional University in America? I’ll leave that question for each of you to answer.

What I know for sure is that you have fulfilled the pledge I made in my inaugural address. It was spoken on the university's behalf to all those with whom we planned to work for the betterment of the Mississippi Delta. Here's what I said: "Since all of us have moved heavy loads at some point in our lives, we understand quite well the importance of lifting our corner, as well as the importance of everyone else doing the same. There's no turning back, when your fingers are under the edge and someone says through gritted teeth, "One, two, three!" You are committed to the task, to your fellow workers, and to the mission of moving the burden from here to there . . . We're ready to shout, 'Go!' and we're just as prepared to heave when another partner takes the lead . . . We're going to lift our corner."

So, here we are all these years later. You have lifted faithfully and well. You have borne the burden and moved Delta State University forward, accomplishing all that time and circumstances would allow. Thank you. It has been and continues to be my privilege to work with each and every one of you.