

Delta State University

William N. LaForge, President

WITH GRATITUDE

State of the University Address

Opening Convocation: Academic Year 2017-18

August 17, 2017

WITH GRATITUDE

Members of the faculty, staff, and extended Delta State family, it is with a sense of excitement and genuine gratitude that I welcome you to the 2017 convocation and to the new academic year — Delta State's 93rd! To you veterans, welcome back for the next chapter in our mutual venture! For new faculty and staff, we are very happy you are here.

At the top of the program, I have a two-word message: Thank you! As we commence this new year, I express my sincere gratitude to each of you for being an important part of the Delta State family.

Thank you for all you do to support our students and advance our interests. I want you to know you are making a positive difference.

It has been said that the most thoughtful gift of all is the gift of time, and I am grateful to each of you for the time you give Delta State, whether paid or volunteer or both.

Thank you also for engaging in the building of our visioning principles and for applying them as guidance as we develop and implement our goals, strategies, and priorities in various enterprises on campus, and as we build the path to a successful future.

I am grateful to you for your understanding and cooperation in dealing with the difficult budget situation that we are experiencing, and for helping us conserve resources and be frugal as we work toward better budget times.

Thank you especially for caring. I have heard it said that, "The people who make a difference are quite often not the ones with the credentials, but the ones with the concern." While we have a wonderfully abundant supply of credentials in this hall, I also deeply appreciate the care and concern each of you has for this university, the work you do, and your support of the students with whom we are entrusted. Our success is measured by theirs. They are our mission. We are here for them. And I'm quite sure that their gratitude for you and your impact on their lives is exceeded only by their glee in earning their degrees.

At this point, I want to acknowledge the passing of valued colleagues this past year: Mistie Barnes, Betty Blackwell, Emerson Brown, Bill Butts, Tommy Cassel, James Donald Cooper, Karen Cummins, Sam Cunningham, Stacy Davidson, Sharon Ellis, Dave “Boo” Ferriss, Linda Haney, Barbara Latham, Walter McKnight, Jim Nicholson, Nola Roncali, Michael Taylor, and Jerry Williams. I ask you to join me in a moment of silence as we remember our fallen colleagues from the past year who, like you, cared deeply about Delta State.

I also want to recognize and thank the executive leadership team on this campus, who are committed to moving this university up the scale of excellence and supporting the outstanding work of our faculty, staff, and students in every way possible. It is a privilege for me to work with the talented members of my Cabinet, and, with deepest gratitude to them, I am pleased to introduce them to you now. The four vice presidents include: Dr. Vernell Bennett, Student Affairs; Dr. Charles McAdams, Academic Affairs and Provost; Dr. Michelle Roberts, Executive Affairs and Chief of Staff; and, Mr. Jamie Rutledge, Finance and Administration. Serving with the four vice presidents to round out the President’s Cabinet — with representation from across campus — are Athletic Director Ronnie Mayers, Interim Executive Director of University Advancement and External Relations Patrick Hundley, Faculty Senate President George Beals, Academic Council Representative Dave Breaux, Administrative Staff Council Chair Caitlyn Thompson, and Student Government President Ashley Griffin.

Call it what you may — a village, a team, a family — but, together, we are doing some amazing things, and I thank this group and each of you for all of the amazing things you do every day — quite often outside the public view and without any acknowledgement, but never without my sincerest appreciation.

STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY

As evidenced by many of the things I will share with you today, and many more things that I simply do not have time to recite in the time allotted, I am pleased to report that the current state of the university is positive, stable, and advancing, and I am optimistic about a bright future.

We certainly have serious challenges, especially budget-related, but we can rightfully commence our new academic year with the confidence that the ship is upright and moving in the right direction — combined with a dose of caution about the budget situation.

Positive, Stable, Advancing, and with a Bright Future

The state of the university is positive because we have such great people and many great programs.

Positive because we value the roles of faculty and staff participation in campus governance, under which your elected leaders serve on the President's Cabinet. I commend and thank the Faculty Senate President, Staff Council Chair, and Academic Council Representative for their service on my Cabinet. I count on them for advice, for a representative voice in discussions and decision-making to ensure that your views are heard and heeded, and for their help in making decisions on every conceivable subject matter and that are in the best interest of the university. And the same goes for our current student government president, Ms. Ashley Griffin, who also holds a voting position on my Cabinet.

Positive because our skilled Facilities Management staff were able to renovate Fugler-Hammett residence hall for only \$350,000, coincidentally the exact amount of outstanding loan payments our superb Student Business Services office collected to reduce bad debt. Positive because we installed security cameras in five major complexes on campus in an effort to protect our people, and the Office of Information Technology blocked more than 30 million spam messages from entering faculty and staff email accounts. Positive because our Facilities Management team keeps this campus beautiful and our buildings in tip-top shape with limited resources.

Positive because we embrace and promote core values such as individual worth, a healthy life style, hospitality, a strong work ethic, cultural enrichment, civility and respect for all, loyalty, ethical conduct, and accountability in all we do — for which I am profoundly grateful.

The state of the university is stable because we have recovered from years of eroding enrollment and financial woes, and righted the ship, although that stability is challenged by the current lack of adequate funding from the state.

Stable because our budget process is responsible, visionary, and transparent, with results that guide us according to strict business and ethical principles.

Stable because our financial indicators demonstrate that, even in a tough budget climate, we are maintaining a healthy cash position and contingency fund, while spending 71% of our operational funds on salaries and benefits for faculty and staff. Stable because of wise management decisions to refinance the Foundation Hall indebtedness to save the university \$8 million, and partnering with Bolivar Medical Center to provide enhanced services for students, faculty, and staff in the refurbished campus health center, while saving the university more than \$250,000. Stable because we managed our budget in such a way as to address the \$2.2 million cut in state funding without having to lay off one employee or terminate one program on campus, and while also adding new faculty positions in three growth areas — Delta Music Institute; Health, Physical Education, and Recreation; and, Nursing.

The state of the university is advancing because of new and bigger ideas and the opportunity for growth.

Advancing because we are distinguishing ourselves and our students in important areas of scholarship, such as efforts to raise the writing skills of all students in all programs, especially upper level courses, and the new requirement that all students in all disciplines complete a capstone experience.

Advancing because the Wiley Planetarium is back in business after being out of commission for seven years. Advancing because our nurse practitioner program enjoys the top ranking in the country for affordability.

Advancing because our faculty and staff travel and teach abroad, present numerous lectures and recitals, and host conferences, camps, and workshops in multiple disciplines on this campus.

Advancing because Professors Doug Mark and Chet Oguz participated in unique Japan Studies programs. Because Professors Kim Rushing, Nina Baghai-Riding, Brian Becker, Lekeitha Morris, Mike Smith, Andrew Wegman, and Chunhui Ren all published important works, as did many other members of the faculty. Advancing because more than two dozen faculty and staff members secured institutional or departmental grants totaling more than \$8 million.

Advancing because 95% of our graduates in teacher education secured teaching positions within their field. Because we created the Dave Heflin Outdoor Recreation Lab. Because the Student Nurses Association completed 22 service projects, and because the May graduating class of Family Nurse Practitioners posted a 100% pass rate on their certification exam. Positive because we have a newly minted Ph.D. in Dr. Gwen Meador in the College of Business and Aviation, a new DNP in Dr. Lacey Blessitt in the School of Nursing, and five staff members who earned masters degrees — Cheryl Beaty, Whitney Delaney, John Mauney, Christopher Smith, and McCulloch Tardy.

Advancing because we have doubled the number of international students in the last three years, and we are providing our students with more opportunities for study abroad and student exchange programs than ever before.

Advancing because we are upgrading our facilities with the renovation of Zeigel Hall and Young-Mauldin Dining Hall, both funded through previous year bond financing, and we recently held the groundbreaking ceremony for the long-awaited Statesmen Boulevard connecting Highway 8 to the athletic complex. And, we are preparing for future facilities needs by developing a campus master plan.

Advancing because our 13 high-end NCAA Division II athletic teams produce champions in and out of the classroom, and because those 400 student-athletes bring so much vitality and value to our student body. We sent 25 of our swim/dive student-athletes to the national championship meet this past spring, and 19 of them were named academic all-American. Advancing because 129 Statesmen and Lady Statesmen athletes made the GSC Academic Honor Roll this past year. After hosting and winning both the GSC and NCAA South Regional tournaments on campus, our baseball team went to the college World

Series with a starting team that wasn't even on the field a year ago. Men's basketball went to the GSC final four for the second straight year, and the women's team went for the 12th year in a row. The women's cross-country team posted a 3.72 GPA! Basketball great Devin Schmidt set the new career scoring record for the Gulf South Conference — 2,581 points.

Advancing because baseball standout Zach Shannon was selected national player of the year. Baseball coach Mike Kinnison was voted national coach of the year. Swimming star Melanie Tombers, a 4.0 undergraduate and MBA graduate, was selected for the Elite 90 Award across all NCAA divisions and sports nationwide. Football standout quarterback Tyler Sullivan won GSC Top 10 honors, was a finalist for all of college football's prestigious Campbell Award for being a top scholar-athlete, and was Delta State's Congressional Fellow in U.S. Senator Thad Cochran's office this spring.

Advancing because we host and sponsor successful conferences on race relations, the blues, international business, and student leadership, and myriad superb programs right here at the Bologna Performing Arts Center. Advancing because Delta State is the home of the Center for Community and Economic Development, as well as the Delta Center for Culture and Learning, which manages the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area. Advancing because we just rolled out our new Local Government Leadership Institute that will help equip local city and county officials throughout the Delta with the knowledge and skills to govern their communities more effectively — another example of outreach and partnership with our surrounding communities funded by private foundation dollars.

Advancing because the mission of our academy is well thought-out, with a focus on academic excellence and student success — our first and foremost visioning principle.

Advancing because we now have a Center for Teaching and Learning to facilitate faculty professional development, and we will grow it. Advancing because we offer monthly faculty and staff development training, and because we have implemented a new employee newsletter to introduce new employees to campus.

Advancing because we are recruiting new students more aggressively than ever. We experienced our third consecutive year of increased enrollment last fall. We saw a 122% increase in dual enrollment, the largest number ever of Phi Theta Kappa honor society

members transferring from community colleges, and the first-ever Statesmen Scholarship Day that brought 28 high achieving students to campus to receive scholarships — 10 of whom received Delta State’s first-ever full-ride, cost-of-attendance scholarships.

Advancing because we are implementing strategies to retain those students and keep them on a path to graduation, including the recent addition of an amazing academic support services program for student-athletes funded by a grant from the state department of human services. Advancing because we see improved student success and retention — including an 8% and 12% increase, respectively, in retention of freshmen and transfer students — due to the good work of our Academic Advising Champions, the Okra Strong/early alert program, supplemental instructors initiative, the Pivot Program, Okra Scholars, and a dynamic First Year Seminar program.

Advancing because we are spreading the word about Delta State throughout the region and beyond via new billboards, digital advertising, and social media resulting in more than 330,000 visits to Delta State’s admissions webpage, 318,000 Facebook interactions, and 61,000 Twitter interactions. We also converted Delta State’s website to a mobile-friendly site and launched the new FeartheOkra.com e-commerce site as a one-stop shopping resource for all things Delta State. We will soon begin live broadcasts on Delta State’s campus radio station — WDSW-LP 88.1 FM. And, this Fall, Communications and Marketing will unveil the full lineup of Delta State’s new emojis, of which we share just a sneak peek with you today, as a way to engage the university’s various audiences and help promote the programs and activities that make Delta State unique.

And, advancing because we have Student Affairs programming such as the Okra Patch, a leadership retreat for student organizations, a strong Greek system, dynamic conferences for our men and women students, and an International Student Advisory Panel to support international programming.

Delta State University has a bright future because we have active plans to pursue our vision of excellence for the years ahead, incredible academic programs with growth in several areas this fall, a focus on student success, and the promise of a successful major fundraising campaign that will help financially undergird the university and its success as

we approach our centennial celebration in 2025, and determine the pathway to this university's success for years to come.

And a brighter future because each and every one of those successes is made possible because of YOU — our greatest resource in the service of our students. I could, of course, continue enumerating our many successes and good work, but time is limited, and I am quite sure that *you* are grateful for that.

Please accept my sincerest thanks for all you do to keep this university on the move onward and upward. And, be sure to go to the President's Office website — www.deltastate.edu/president — for a more complete listing of successes across campus this past year.

Challenges and Threats

On the other hand, not everything is rosy, and I want to make sure that you are aware of the negatives and threats. Certainly, we are not without our challenges in the budget arena. We have millions of dollars of deferred maintenance on campus buildings, and the state did not pass a bond bill this year, which would have provided funding for critical major improvements such as badly needed roofing, elevator repair, and ADA-related compliance projects.

Incidentally, also not funded is the building of a replacement president's home that is now on hold because the state did not provide bond funding this year. Additionally, no annual facility repair funding was provided by the state for this year. And, most damaging of all, we received a \$2.2 million reduction in operating funds from the state — the pool of funds from which come most campus expenses including salaries. A sad and disappointing statistic to report is that, for the first time in history, state funding is no longer Delta State's largest source of operating revenue. This year, we will derive less revenue from the state than from tuition. Arguably, we have crossed over from being a state-supported university to a state-assisted university.

It is important that everyone understand that these budget cuts are very serious. In the last year and a half, all eight state universities have experienced six mid-year budget cuts totaling more than 5% of our state-provided budget, plus another 5% cut for the new

fiscal year now underway. All told, that's more than \$100 million stripped from the budgets of all eight state-supported universities. And, we are hearing that the next year may not be any better in terms of the state's revenue.

To offset the \$2.2 million in state budget cuts for Delta State this year — a huge hit to a \$46 million operational budget — we took a number of steps to produce alternative revenue and to reduce expenditures. On the revenue side of the ledger, we increased tuition 7% or \$441 per year, which translates into an annual tuition rate of \$6,859 this year. Even with that higher figure, we are still a bargain and great value, and we maintain the same competitive position compared with the other seven universities in the state because they all raised their tuition too — some more than ours. Compare our \$6,859 tuition to that of the two universities where I taught for 30 years — Georgetown and George Washington universities — where tuition alone now exceeds \$50,000 a year!

For additional revenue, we are also utilizing some “savings” from our contingency funds, and we are asking the DSU Foundation for additional private support.

On the spending side of the ledger, we created savings by closing the golf course, discontinuing our operations at the Coahoma County Higher Education Center, postponing the filling of some positions on campus, and reducing funding for Athletics. As you know, this summer we went to a four-day work-week and closed some campus buildings to save on utilities, and those moves paid off handsomely.

And, again, we achieved the task of offsetting the \$2.2 million in cuts without having to lay off anyone or eliminate any program on campus.

While we are lifting the hiring freeze and spending freeze that were put in place in the spring, we encourage and ask you to continue being very conscious of our need to conserve and spend wisely. I am truly grateful to everyone on campus for joining our efforts to manage our way through this challenging budget time. We will hope for, and work toward, a better budget climate for next year; but, that outcome is largely dependent on the fiscal health of the state.

Obviously, and quite regrettably, in this budget climate, we cannot even consider pay raises — a concern that I know is always on your mind. Frankly, I am growing weary,

as I know you must be, of my standing up here most years, and saying we will consider salary increases if the state provides the dollars. But, simply put, that's what it's going to take. I am painfully aware, as are you, that we are woefully behind in supporting our faculty and staff with the compensation levels that are deserved and that are on par with at least our regional peer universities. But, I pledge to you that we will continue to do everything possible to make meaningful pay raises a reality if the state does provide us the funding to do so in future budget cycles. My colleagues at the other universities, the Commissioner of Higher Education, our IHL Board, and I are doing everything we can to persuade our state leaders to invest more in higher education. The state's revenue shortfall is the major contributor to the state's budget woes, and, therefore, ours as well, and we will continue fighting the good fight for increased funding.

DELTA STATE'S FUTURE

So, what now? Where do we go this year? What should we be thinking about and doing? What should be our individual and collective sense of purpose and call to action?

Certainly, we should continue our fundamental work and the programs and activities that distinguish us and make us the university we are. But, what else should be on our agenda?

I'm reminded of the old adage that people tend to gravitate toward one of three directions — toward success, toward mediocrity, or toward oblivion. And the most dangerous is mediocrity because it is so easy and comfortable. Obviously, we want to avoid oblivion, and we want to pursue success. But what does that mean for your role and department — and for the university at large?

For starters, I suggest that each of us focus on the intensity needed to do our jobs well. It might be helpful, as we begin the new academic year, to step back and do a mental "reset" on how we approach our responsibilities — to ensure that we are sharp in our delivery, responsive to our students, and proficient in every way possible.

This past year, most of the campus put into place operational plans that support and advance our 10 visioning principles that I rolled out one year ago. We now have targeted

goals, strategies, and priorities in play in most, if not all, campus operations. Refresh those plans from time to time this year. Check off your accomplishments, and set new goals and objectives so that we are always moving up the ladder of excellence. Make sure the operational plans tied to our vision are ambitious, yet realistic and achievable. Connect your goals to the principles of our vision, and make them dynamic as you implement them.

Without a vision, there is no purpose in your mission. Without goals and objectives, there is no focus and drive. Without a clear path and strategies, there is no way to achieve those goals and objectives. Without priorities and persistence, the end game will seem unreachable. And, without our individual and collective passion to do our best, the end-game will *BE* unreachable.

We encourage our students to “Join In and Stand Out.” I issue the same charge to you. We need your engagement and participation on campus, whether it is through the Faculty Senate, Staff Council, an additional role in your department, service and volunteer opportunities, advising a student organization, recruiting students more aggressively, or speaking up about an issue or concern. To ratchet up my connection with you, and to help me have a better feel for the campus, I am taking two new steps this year.

First, I am replacing my general “First Friday” meetings, that I have offered to faculty since arriving on campus four years ago, with more targeted and periodic opportunities to meet and visit with faculty *and* staff in each academic or administrative unit on campus. My office staff will be in touch with each area on campus during the year to offer a time for a visit. Secondly, once or twice a month, I will invite a few staff and faculty members to join me for luncheon discussions, and I look forward to hosting many of you throughout the coming year. My hope is that these opportunities to meet will foster better communications with all members of the Delta State family.

At our essence, we are a people organization from top to bottom. As humans, we often tend to become comfortable with the status quo. In some cases, that is just fine. In other instances, there are times when it is wise to depart from that comfort zone. As the old saying goes, tradition is only what we did yesterday. As do you, I understand that people often question or resist change. However, change — smart change — is a key to the

future in many cases, and we must be bold enough to embrace opportunities to make good changes.

To make change requires us to reimagine our circumstances, our future, our possibilities, and our vision for success down the road. Going into this new year, and especially in your college and departmental meetings, I ask each of you to engage in that imagining — to reset your thinking about the great things that you can accomplish individually on this campus, and the great things that we can accomplish together. Reimagine your role, but more importantly, reimagine your responsibility and delivery. And work together with our leadership team as we all imagine a better Delta State.

A professor from my graduate school days has written a book that calls for a new world order. He inscribed my copy of the book with these words: “We share a sense of responsibility for making a better world.” Similarly, here on this campus, we each share a sense of responsibility for making Delta State better — for our students and for those of us who live and work here.

Why shouldn’t we engage in a sense of idealism about who and what we are at Delta State? After all, our ideas and actions make this university what it is every day. There’s no reason why we cannot apply even *better* ideas and actions to remaking the reality and condition of Delta State. But we must be intentional about it. It won’t just happen. I firmly believe that there is no limit to the creativity of the human mind.

All of us live in the natural world, as well as in the human world. But we also live in the world of our imagination in which we develop and share our dreams. We are articulating our dreams for this university through our vision, and, as we do so, we should remember that our lives in the world of the imagination have a powerful effect on how we live and what we do in those other two worlds, both natural and human. Let each of us be a creative thought leader in this space we call university. Just look at things created in the imagination — inventions, art, music, entertainment, and ideas that have become social reality and physical objects in the natural world. And, they all started with thoughts in someone’s imagination.

We can do that here. We are smart people, and we care about this place we call Delta State. Let us use the knowledge and tools we have to make this university better and more successful. Let us get the basics done right, but also let us think big about our future and act accordingly as we channel our caring about Delta State into bigger and bolder ideas and initiatives.

I conclude as I began. With humble gratitude, I ask you to embrace my feeling of hope and optimism that portends a bright future for Delta State, even in the face of budget challenges. Think of the successes under our belt in just this past year. Consider the legacies we have created at this institution in which you have played a role. And, imagine what we can do next — *if* we just apply ourselves. Let us harness the imagination, knowledge, and emotion we each have to help lay out a path of success for this university. And, let us have the courage and the enthusiasm to give it our best shot. I pledge my best efforts, and I ask you to do the same. My gratitude, this university's gratitude, and the gratitude of our students, especially, will be eternal.