



# *State of the University*

**President William N. LaForge**

August 13, 2020

# Delta State University

William N. LaForge, President

## **DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY *CARES***

State of the University Address

Opening Convocation: Academic Year 2020-21

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## DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY CARES!

Heartiest greetings, colleagues, and welcome to the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year. It is good to “see” everyone back, even though it’s in a virtual setting.

The title of my remarks today is “Delta State University *Cares!*”

That maxim has always been the case for this university. But, it is truer today than ever before. Caring is in this university’s DNA. Our caring qualities have been demonstrated splendidly throughout the years—during war times and the depression era, and through natural disasters such as tornados, hurricanes, floods, and ice storms.

Caring is evidenced in a huge way in the everyday interaction between our students and the faculty and staff who teach and support them on their college journeys. Those of us who are Statesmen alumni often recall with great fondness that extra-mile effort, welcoming smile and kind word, supportive advice, and career and life counseling we were fortunate to receive from a caring faculty or staff member. That caring quality alone is one of the signature features that has stood the test of time, made us feel truly a part of the “Delta State family,” and attracted generation after generation of new students to this special place we call Delta State University.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early March, almost everything about the way we do business on campus changed—except carrying on the academic mission and caring!

And, what a uniquely strange recent half year we have just experienced! The move to all online instruction for the spring and summer terms. Four day work weeks with limited numbers of faculty and staff physically on campus. Lots of work from home. Almost no students on campus. No in-person spring commencement exercise. Building closures. Event cancellations and postponements. No paper products on the store shelves. All because of a viral strain that likely came from a bat in China. COVID-19. Coronavirus. Pandemic. PPE. Quarantine. Shelter at home. These words and phrases were once rarely heard. Now, they are part of our everyday household terminology.

From the top, thank you, colleagues, for applying creativity and ingenuity to keeping

this university open and functional, and to making our academic processes work for our students during this challenging time—from late spring, through summer, and now into the fall, as well. To the faculty, thank you for going the extra mile for our students as you learned and developed new methods of delivering course content and services, of conducting meetings and interviews, of streamlining the work product in your area, and of keeping the engines of the university working well as we navigated uncharted territory. Thanks to our staff and administrators for providing the leadership and support needed to keep the ship of state afloat—for being resilient, flexible, and dependable, even, for some, while on administrative leave or while working from home!

As we stripped away many of the traditional accoutrements and everyday activities of a normally functioning university campus, and were left with the basic core of our key mission—teaching and learning—what did we learn in the process about the modern university model and about ourselves? And, how will those lessons prepare us for this semester and beyond?

Many of the challenges placed in our laps by the coronavirus pandemic call to mind the notion and importance of values and priorities for the university, especially within the academy, and even more so with respect to our students. What are our key values as a university? What do we value as important priorities? Our ten Visioning Principles come to mind, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to dust them off and refresh our memories of their content. I will spare you that exercise in the context of my remarks today, but commend them to you as a refresher.

I will, however, highlight in my remarks today one constant theme that permeates throughout the Visioning document, and one that applies to each of us every day as we serve Delta State. That is the concept and virtue of *caring!*

A fellow university president, who is also a personal friend, recently wrote the following words concerning the challenge and value of education for a student. “The journey itself is the purpose. The value lies in the pursuit. Exploring. Discovering. Facing challenges and overcoming them or failing completely and

finding a way to press on anyway. The unforgiving but tremendously gratifying adventure of learning is how students build character, develop wisdom, and form an enlightened awareness of who they are and what they want. The path to greatness is almost never a straight line, nor should it be.” (Dr. Dwayne McCay, President, Florida Institute of Technology) To me, the challenge and value of education he so rightly notes as being important to students, cry out for a third prong—the need for genuine caring on the part of all of us.

Caring in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on new and heightened meaning. The COVID environment seems to color and influence almost everything going on around us. And, the concept of caring is likewise expanded, not just relating to caring about personal health and the pandemic *per se*, but also pointing to the need to care about the institutions around us, higher education included. Just as one might consider what to take along when leaving a burning building, what things do we consider to have the most important value in our university world that we view as a “take-away” from the current health crisis? If there is a so-called “black swan” outcome, what is the answer to fixing our deficiencies and improving our system?

This introspection can certainly lead to some academic soul-searching that might just give us a good reason to revisit our true reasons for being. Just what is it that we might see if we peek into that open door and ponder our true-north purpose and what we value most in our enterprise? And, as a university, how can we care more and better? As we navigate these challenging times, we continue to blend our caring with a fervent hope for better times.

Where, then, are we today? What changes from this past year are permanent, and which ones are temporary? Are there some changes that make us a better institution? What have we learned, for better or worse, through this bizarre and crippling pandemic? Is this blight on the world actually a “black swan” event? It seems so.

Beyond the unmistakable priorities of looking out for the health and well-being of ourselves and our students, the more pertinent question for us as a university is whether it is a pivotal event for higher education and for Delta State. Is there a silver lining to the

pandemic? Are there nuggets of wisdom regarding effective pedagogy that we can pull from the ashes of the current pandemic challenges? Can we become a better teaching delivery system for the benefit of our students?

For example, the move to all online instruction, at minimum, provided us with a backup system to teach our classes, and one that has morphed into our frontline delivery system. But, it also demonstrated opportunities for expanded ways of doing business, with many possible variations. What's the right balance among online, hybrid, and face-to-face classes? We are on the cusp of finding out this semester.

The answer may still be evolving, and it behooves us to give careful thought to what an ideal mix looks like. Online courses are more in vogue for some, and in today's climate, more necessary than ever. Yet, we also do not aspire to become a Southern New Hampshire or a University of Phoenix. Face classes have been our bread and butter underpinning of a fully engaged teaching-learning experience, and our students are clearly on record as preferring face-to-face instruction.

So, as we move forward, I ask you to engage fully in our discussion about the right academic mix that will serve our students best in the short-term and over the next decade and beyond. It will certainly be a learning experience for all of us as we move through the next few months. I appreciate your dedication to our mission and your patience with our processes.

With respect and appreciation, I leave it to you as the professionals to dig deeply into these areas of inquiry in your department or division discussions; in your own course development; in your interaction with your students; in your coffee lounge and water cooler discussions; and, in your chat rooms. I encourage you to use the backdrop of this pandemic to engage in all those inquiries for your own benefit and that of our students. Doing so just might make us a better university and a more caring university.

What a challenging academic year 2019-20 posed for Delta State! In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, we also faced an extraordinary budget cycle, emerging

from a challenging cash position early last fall to a place where we have the most accurate and priority-reflective budget in place that we have likely seen in any recent year. I must tell you that we have devoted an incredible amount of time to dealing with budget challenges, and I think we are “wrestling the tiger” with good success. We cut a total of \$3.2 million from our operating budget (\$1.7 million in permanent cuts and \$1.5 million in temporary cuts), added creative revenue avenues, bumped up tuition 6%, endured yet another reduction in state funding support, and looked deeply inward to ensure that our budget reflects and supports our university goals and priorities—all resulting, quite notably, in no major personnel cuts.

For a piece of very good news, we exceeded our governing board’s expectations and required target for cash on hand. With your assistance and cooperation, we trimmed expenses and maximized revenue, resulting in nearly \$800,000 above the required target, which gives us a head start on reaching our cash goal for the new fiscal year.

Thank you to the entire Delta State family for your patience and understanding, and for helping us arrive at this point in budgeting. I can’t imagine a more thorough, comprehensive, and transparent budget process than the one we undertook to fashion the operating budget in which we are now operating.

Kudos to our faculty and staff, the Faculty Senate and Administrative Staff Council, our SGA leadership, deans and chairs, the Cabinet, program directors, and, essentially, all sectors of the campus for your toeing the line, and for your thoughtful consideration, and, ultimately, support regarding our budget process and progress.

In thanking especially the past and present members of the President’s Cabinet, I am pleased to recognize and introduce those individuals representing the campus and serving on this year’s Cabinet: Our five vice presidents, who also comprise my Executive Committee, include Dr. Charles McAdams, Academic Affairs and Provost; Dr. Michelle Roberts, Executive Affairs; Mr. Jamie Rutledge, Finance and Administration and Chief Financial Officer; Dr. Vernell Bennett-Fairs, Student Affairs; and, Mr. Rick Munroe, University Advancement and External Relations. Other members of the Cabinet include: Mr. Mike Kinnison, Athletic Director; Dean Jeff Slagell, Academic Council; Chief Jeff Johns,

Administrative Staff Council; Dr. Jon Westfall, Faculty Senate; and, Mr. Richard Word, Student Government Association.

As a result of the new processes and prudent budgeting practices we put into place last year, we are entering this new academic year with a realistic and balanced budget. We have relaxed restrictions on hiring and other expenditures in order to give managers across the campus the authority and flexibility to do their jobs better. Because we now have a more reliable budget, each campus department, division, program, or unit should be able to plan adequately and work through the next eleven months with the ability to rely on the funds available to them. And, we should be able to continue building our cash reserves to even higher levels. But, everything is dependent on final enrollment numbers, the effect of the current pandemic on our budget, as well as the financial health of the State. We shall see.

Speaking of enrollment numbers, like many colleges and universities, we anticipate a downturn in enrollment this fall due to the pandemic. Many potential students will take a “gap” year, attend a community college, or decide on another path for themselves. It’s impossible to predict what the final fall enrollment numbers will be. However, in the Cabinet-approved budget for this year, we have built in several contingencies that will “cushion” the blow if we have a decreased number of students. Our hope, and best estimates, are that we can meet a tuition revenue shortfall, up to a certain point. If that tipping point is exceeded, we will, of course, have to look at other means to adjust the budget. This is just another reminder that we face considerable uncertainty in the days ahead. We will keep you closely apprised of all developments in this area.

For the current year’s budget, we unfortunately received a 2.6% cut in state appropriations. However, on the plus side, we did receive \$3 million in bond funding that will support seriously-needed campus building repairs and renovations, including elevator replacement, residence hall renovations, and ADA-related projects.

Recent improvements in facilities include: new roofing on the Wright Art



building, Blansett Hall, and Sillers Coliseum, which also benefitted from HVAC replacement. Needed repairs, which resulted from storm damage this winter, were made to the lighting system around the football stadium and some adjacent facilities, and residence halls were given a major spruce-up for our incoming students.

The food court in the H.L. Nowell Union is undergoing a \$2 million renovation. Once completed, it will contain an all new full-menu Chick-fil-A, a Firehouse Subs shop, an expanded Burrito Bowl, and the ever-popular Starbucks. I hope you have noticed and appreciate the new LED lighting across campus that was funded through hundreds of thousands of dollars of Entergy grants.

The new residence for the president, which was financed through building plant funds, is basically complete, and the move-in process should begin very soon. My wife, Nancy, and I look forward to the time when it is socially safe to host all of you for a reception and tour. This new facility is the university's house, and I hope to open it up to the campus and community soon.

As for the current state of the university, the headlines are clear and come as no surprise. They are the two topics I have just addressed thematically—the budget and the pandemic. These two major areas of focus are obviously interconnected, and they each present challenges and accompanying uncertainty. Here is how I characterize and describe them for you.

First, operationally and financially at this moment, we are steady and prepared for the challenges ahead. Because we remain a slim-margin budget, due to near total dependence on state funds and student tuition for our revenue, our budget plans are conservative and flexible. Our academic foundation as a regional teaching university is sound. Our academic accreditations are in order. We enjoy broad input on campus in all our decision-making. We have terrific faculty and staff who care. We have a number of well-established programs, including several signature programs for which we are well-known. We deliver outstanding academic and extracurricular program punches for our students. The uncertainty arises from forces mostly beyond our control, such as possible future budget cuts and possible enrollment decline due to COVID-19.

Secondly, in the social, health, and interpersonal arenas, we believe we are prepared as much as possible for the COVID-19-related challenges that face us this year. But, frankly, we all share a bit of concern and uncertainty—even anxiety—about the health and safety of our university family. To mitigate that concern—and not merely to make ourselves feel better or more confident—we are following the advice of national, state, and local health and medical experts.

Our response to the COVID-19 crisis has been assisted financially through a series of federal CARES Act funding that has been quite helpful to Delta State. The university made several hundred thousand dollars of CARES grants to students for their unexpected expenses due to COVID-19, with more to come. With the assistance of another pool of CARES funding, we reimbursed students, on a prorated basis, for their expenses related to room, board, and parking, which went partially unused when we had to move to a “shelter-at-home” mode in the Spring, due to COVID-19. With a third wave of CARES funding, we are purchasing personal protection equipment (PPE), technology, cleaning and sanitizing materials, screening capabilities, and other materials to support our efforts to combat the dreaded COVID.

We have worked very hard over the last few months to develop the smartest plans and strategies available to protect the campus as much as possible. Untold hundreds of hours of planning on the part of our Cabinet, Executive Committee, and a number of other campus leaders and offices have contributed to this team effort. We have an excellent action plan, and we have put in place a number of significant protocols—for students and employees—that we believe will be effective, if we follow them.

We have also hired Ms. Robin Douglas to serve as our COVID-19 Response Coordinator, so that we have someone on campus who is focused solely on overseeing the University’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms. Douglas, and a new Healthcare Specialist, to be named, will work to help us reduce the spread of COVID-19 on campus, track the virus among members of the Delta State family, and implement strategies to promote behaviors that create a healthy campus

environment.

Here are the important messages and protocols, as they relate to best practices for protecting yourself and others from being exposed to COVID-19: 1) the requirement to wear masks in public areas and in classes; 2) frequent hand washing and sanitizing; 3) diligent social distancing in every venue; 4) hand sanitizing stations in every building; 5) crowd limitations; 6) uniform symptom and temperature screening across campus for every person every day; 7) the use of technology to supplant the use of face-to-face gatherings; 8) increased mental health counseling availability; 9) access to COVID-19 testing; and, 10) immediate response procedures for actual or suspected positive cases, including quarantine and isolation facilities.

Here's where we need and request your dedicated help, support, and role modeling. All of these safety measures are sound, medically and practically, but we must stick to the script to make them work and to produce the desired results. Stay home if you are feeling ill. Be diligent and follow the protocols to a tee. Please serve as a good example for our students and each other by adhering to best advice and practices.

Our protocols and recommended best practices are in place to protect you and those around you. Keep yourselves safe and protected, as well as your colleagues. We need everyone on board to implement and enforce these important protocols, and to help us establish and maintain a culture of health, safety, and prevention.

Despite the budget and COVID-19 related challenges of the past year, the university still notched some great successes, and I am pleased to share with you a sampling from across the campus.

Thanks to the Office of Student Affairs and some generous supporters, the Statesman's Shelf Food Pantry in the Union is fully operational and stocked.

Vice President Vernell Bennett-Fairs, was selected to participate in the 2020 Millennium Leadership Initiative (MLI), a premier leadership development program of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), which provides individuals traditionally underrepresented in the highest ranks of postsecondary education with the opportunity to develop the skills and networks to advance to a college presidency.

The Office of Admissions was on track to lead us to a banner undergraduate recruiting year before the pandemic hit, and they have done an outstanding job working with student recruits to mitigate the expected downturn in enrollment. That office made a terrific and swift transition to contemporary virtual recruitment that includes virtual tours, social media prospect outreach via YouTube and TikTok videos, virtual recruitment sessions, personal phone calls, and handwritten notes.

We also implemented the “Statesman's Countdown to Campus” initiative—a video series that Student Affairs produced to keep students engaged, informed, and entertained in the months leading up to the fall term. Athletics, Greek Life, and several standout students were spotlighted in the series.

I am pleased to report that the Diversity Committee nominated, and I appointed, Ms. Michelle Johansen to be the university’s Coordinator of Diversity and Inclusion. This enhanced position includes a broad portfolio of responsibilities dealing with every aspect of Delta State’s diversity initiatives—from program planning and execution, compliance issues, and chairing the Diversity Committee, to advising the campus and me on a wide array of related topics—all aimed at promoting equity, diversity, inclusion, and a true sense of belonging for all components of the university community. It also incorporates the current Quality Enhancement Program, “A World Class Experience: Improving Cultural Competency at Delta State,” which Ms. Johansen has overseen for some time.

From the academy, I have selected just a few samples of a wide array of excellence demonstrated in our three colleges, graduate studies, and the school of nursing. For a more complete listing, please refer to [www.deltastate.edu/president/accomplishments](http://www.deltastate.edu/president/accomplishments).

In the College of Arts and Sciences, Professor Andrew Wegmann completed the editing of a book titled “*French Connections: Cultural Mobility in North America and the Atlantic World, 1600-1785.*”

Thanks to the efforts of our colleagues in the Geospatial Information Technology department, Delta State became the first undergraduate degree

program to achieve collegiate accreditation from the United States Geospatial Intelligence Foundation.

Adjunct instructor of music Kevin Tharp successfully defended his dissertation and received the Ph.D. in music education from the University of Mississippi.

Faculty and students in the Division of Social Sciences and History were instrumental in producing the award-winning documentary, the “1969 Black Student Sit-In Oral History Project.” As a result of their great work, they received the Elbert R. Hilliard Oral History Award from the Mississippi Historical Society.

As a direct result of the 2019 Child Safety Summit held on campus, the Department of Social Work has developed the inter-professional Child Advocacy Studies Training (CAST) Certificate Program which educates students to be effective advocates for children and families experiencing abuse, neglect, and family violence.

The College of Business and Aviation has acquired funds through a USDA grant to establish a Business Assistance Center. Professor Lisa Cooley completed her requirements for the Ph.D., and was selected as “The Lady Statesman Emerald Award of Excellence Top Faculty.” DSU’s Phi Beta Lambda Chapter student members Davontre Henderson and Alexis Rover finished first place in the organization’s National Competition in “Emerging Business Issues.”

Delta State’s College of Education and Human Sciences’ Teacher Education unit was one of the three Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning programs to partner with the Mississippi Department of Education and the University of Florida as part of the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR), shaping policy to reform teacher and leader preparation and revise licensure standards in the state.

The Robert E. Smith School of Nursing successfully completed national (CCNE) and state (MS IHL) Nursing Accreditation for all programs [BSN, MSN, DNP], and did so, very significantly, with all standards met and no compliance issues noted.

Special kudos to our Office of Graduate Studies and Continuing Education for the great work of the task forces on graduate and summer school enrollment. The results

increased summer enrollment 16.9% (vs. summer 2019) and graduate enrollment 32.2% (vs. summer 2019), and they project a significant increase in graduate students for this fall. Also, our Grants Office increased grant funding 42% (\$6,160,973).

The Student Success Center received a five-year, \$400,000 grant from the Woodward Hines Education Foundation for the IMPACT initiative that focuses on increasing the graduation rates of historically underserved and underrepresented students.

Under the guidance of Vice President Michelle Roberts, a major project is underway to conduct a 360-review of our entire portfolio of scholarships and how we award them. Stay tuned for additional information about this project. Also, Dr. Roberts was selected for the Lady Statesman Emerald Award of Excellence in the Top Administrator category.

In Administration and Finance, Kelvin Davis, Director of Student Business Services, was recognized as one of the Delta's Top Minority Business Leaders by the Delta Business Journal, was accepted in the Leadership Mississippi class of 2020, and was recognized as an Outstanding Staff Member by DSU's African-American Student Council.

Despite the interruptions of COVID-19, the Bologna Performing Arts Center celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with record individual giving, corporate support, and grants. Its Arts Education department served more than 10,000 K-12 students and teachers this past year, and distributed 2,800 books as part of its initiative to connect literacy with the performing arts.

Our Office of Information Technology has worked to provide Delta State with access to all Internet2 features, along with additional bandwidth. OIT has also outfitted 25 classrooms across campus with new technology that provides hyflex capabilities for teaching on campus and remote students. Two hundred new laptops have been ordered to replace aging faculty and staff computers across campus, and an additional two hundred computers have been ordered to upgrade computer labs.

One hundred computers have been ordered to start a computer loan program for students lacking the necessary means to purchase adequate technology.

Despite very challenging times, and a reduced number of employees, our Facilities Management team has continued to keep the campus and our buildings looking great, in addition to ensuring compliance with COVID-related sanitization responsibilities. Under Director Gerald Finley's leadership, the department is doing great things for us, and making us all proud of our campus.

From our Office of Advancement and External Relations, the alumni relations program launched a new alumni connect app, and more than 400 alumni have already signed on. Communications and Marketing won a CASE Silver award for the Winning the Race website. And, we continue the university's and the Foundation's Centennial fundraising capital campaign, for which a steering committee is now in place.

In the world of athletics, we witnessed some truly outstanding performances and recognitions. In swimming, Emanuel Fava recorded a national championship time in the 200-meter individual medley, and Michael Maley was selected for the NCAA Elite 90 Award. Star golfer, Zach Zediker, earned NCAA Division II Golf's highest honor when he was named the Jack Nicklaus Award winner.

Our women's basketball team made a regional tournament appearance. Our men's tennis team was undefeated and regionally ranked prior to the unfortunate suspension of the season due to the pandemic. The Gulf South Conference (GSC) recognized 33 Delta State student-athletes with All Decade honors, including Veronica Walker as women's basketball player of the decade, and Zack Shannon as the baseball player of the decade. And, Athletic Director and former baseball coach, Mike Kinnison, was named Gulf South Conference baseball coach of the decade. Coach Kinnison was also one of six inductees into the American Baseball Coaches Association's Hall of Fame Class of 2020.

Also, in the athletic realm, our own President Emeritus Kent Wyatt was named to the 2020 Gulf South Conference Hall of Fame Class. He holds the distinction of being the first institutional president inducted into the GSC Hall of Fame.

These highlights and accomplishments make us proud and motivated to move the

needle this year ever further toward the benchmark of excellence. Please join in and stand out as we dedicate ourselves to overcoming the challenges before us and to orchestrating a terrific year for our students.

During the past year, we also endured the loss of fallen colleagues, students, and friends: Dr. Rutherford Berger, Ms. Rhianna Billings, Dr. Martin Bond, The Honorable Bob M. Dearing, Mr. Dylan Dempsey, Mr. Jessie Eatmon, Ms. Claire Hilliard, Mr. Tevora Howard, Mr. Rodney Hughes (Delta State's first black SGA president), Mr. Calvin Isaac, Dr. Mary Alice Cates Jones, Mr. Bennie McNeil, Mr. Bob Morris, Mr. Ed Murphy, Dr. James Murrell, Ms. Missy Pearce, Ms. Joyce Phillips, Mr. Drew Roxrode, Mr. Troyce Taylor, Mr. "Ruff" Turner, Mr. Bob Waller, Mr. Jimmy Wilson, and Mr. Joseph Woods. Please join me in a moment of silence in their memory.

On a happy note, I am pleased to announce an exciting major program addition for the fall. In this year of spectacular new space adventures and successes for the United States, including the recent mission to the International Space Station and a new Mars probe, the Delta State University Colloquia Distinguished Lecture Series will welcome NASA's Deputy Administrator, James Morhard. More information will be provided at a later date.

Also this fall, Delta State will celebrate its 95<sup>th</sup> year as an institution of higher learning. And, stay tuned for information in the coming months as we begin to think about plans for our centennial in 2025.

As you know, we typically have a "welcome luncheon" in the Union for all faculty and staff as we begin the new academic year. Regrettably, due to the pandemic, we must cancel that event. However, I still would like to treat you to lunch. So, although I am unable to host you for lunch in person, I am doing the next best thing by adding a modest amount to your Okra Kard so that you can enjoy lunch, a coffee, or anything that can be purchased with Delta State's Okra Green Anywhere funds. The funds will be placed on your account in the next few days, and you can use them at any on- or off-campus establishment that honors the Okra Kard.



I conclude with a final note about the caring nature and attributes of Delta State. We are in some troubling times, even beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Race relations, culture wars, social injustice, divisive symbols, political division and incivility, people who live and operate in a negative and often hate-driven manner, and government leadership that won't lead—all present concern and challenges for us in our professional and personal lives. I am proud that Delta State stands tall in representing the best in the human spirit by living and sharing our basic values and principles, which include the notion of caring on many different levels. I am committed to adhering to and adding to that well-earned reputation, and I hope you are too.

The latest issue of the Delta State magazine focused on the theme of caring. If you missed it, I commend it to you for reading. It contains many special testaments to our caring culture and reputation, personified by students, faculty, staff, and alumni. And, on a very local and personal level, never is it more evident that the supportive, helpful, welcoming, go-the-extra-miles attitudes and actions of our faculty and staff throughout the years are needed today. I felt it as a student a half century ago, and I see it on this campus today.

Thank you for keeping this treasured virtue of caring alive today and for our future students. That caring quality we exhibit is a signature feature that has stood the test of time and sets us apart. Now, more than ever, we need to be that caring campus community and family for our students and for each other during these difficult times.

As we continue to face the challenges of the pandemic, we will stay the course of offering the best possible education for our students, while ensuring the safest possible environment on campus.

As we commence this challenging and uncertain year, I ask you to join me in continuing to demonstrate what it means to be part of the caring culture for Delta State and our students. Not only is special caring important in this moment, it is a fitting legacy for all of us to leave to this university.

And here is a fitting quotation that makes that point: "Every generation leaves behind a legacy. What that legacy will be is determined by the people of that generation.

What legacy do you want to leave behind?"

That is a quote from the late John Lewis. Today, I say to you: What will be the caring legacy that you leave Delta State?

Here's to a productive and healthy year for all of us! As NBC's Lester Holt is wont to say, "Please take care of yourselves and each other."

Wear the mask, and Godspeed!