

Delta State University

William N. LaForge, President

WE ARE BACK: SO, WHAT'S NEXT?

State of the University Address

Opening Convocation: Academic Year 2021-22

August 12, 2021

WE ARE BACK: SO, WHAT'S NEXT?

Greetings to our veteran faculty and staff members and to newcomers alike, and welcome to the start-up of the new academic year.

We are back, at least for the most part! We are back in business at full staff and full speed, live and in person, with mostly face-to-face classes. And, we are back populating our beloved campus and all its venues.

What a whirlwind year we just experienced, full of challenges like we have never faced before. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic permeated throughout the academy and across campus in so many ways. We became a different university in many ways, and we learned how to play Hollywood Squares on Zoom.

I applaud our faculty and staff for your stellar efforts in retrofitting our instructional delivery system and our entire campus environment to meet the health and safety requirements and protocols necessary to combat the dreaded virus. Despite a few spikes in positive testing here and there, we were basically successful throughout the year in keeping the number of COVID-19 cases on campus tamped down to low single digits. Thank you for being good team members in this important battle this past year, and for continuing to do so as we commence the new academic year.

While we welcome the reset to some semblance of normalcy, we are only partially back, unfortunately, due to the surge of the Delta variant. Thus, today's convocation is both in person and live-streamed for the benefit of all faculty and staff. Just as we began to break out of the COVID-19 climate to some extent, we now find ourselves in the position of having to remain vigilant so as not to fall into a trap of complacency and to allow a resurgence of the virus amongst us. As you likely know by now, we have relaxed many of our response protocols from this past year, and we are following CDC and state health department guidance as closely as possible.

But, we are necessarily keeping some protocols in place to confront the Delta variant surge that is now upon us. The state health department advises that we may

likely see a huge increase in cases on all university campuses as school opens and soon thereafter. The Delta variant is more virulent than the alpha strain, it is three times more contagious than its predecessor, and it can spread more quickly to more people. So, the challenges ahead for us, especially in the first several weeks of the semester, are quite serious. We are advised that approximately 75% of our students will come back to school unvaccinated, thus presenting the possibility for lots of quick transmission and positive cases. State health officials strongly recommend that all employees and students get vaccinated.

The basic state of play regarding COVID-19 response for Delta State — as well as for the other seven state universities — is simple: Until the Delta variant surge subsides, masks are required for all students, faculty, staff, and visitors while indoors on campus — including in classes —, and this requirement applies whether individuals are vaccinated or unvaccinated. We are advised to avoid indoor “mix and mingle” social gatherings that facilitate transmission of COVID-19. We highly recommend that everyone get vaccinated if you are not vaccinated already. We are very actively promoting the vaccine, and offering it to all comers. Just go by our campus health center. Our first and highest responsibility as a university is to provide a safe campus environment, and we aim to do so. Parents, students, and you — our faculty and staff — look to us to ensure that standard of safety. Hopefully, this new surge will subside in the early fall, and we can relax the mask requirement at some point. Until then, please join in our efforts to communicate the new protocols to the entire campus community, and serve as good exemplars by getting the vaccine and masking up. Also, if you would feel safer wearing an N-95 mask, just ask. We have an ample supply.

As for the state of the university, first and foremost, we are a safe and healthy campus. We are in a strong position — financially and academically. Our cash position is far better than just a year ago, despite the challenges of COVID-19, and our budget is a robust and workable one, despite enrollment losses last year. We increased our cash position by more than \$2.5 million over last year, and reduced our student debt receivables by more than a million dollars. Our leadership team is solid, and we

welcome the energy and fresh ideas of new members. We have doubled down on recruiting efforts. Our undergraduate and graduate admissions teams have worked very hard to help us return to pre-COVID numbers of students, and we are cautiously optimistic about an increase in fall enrollment. The Centennial Capital Fundraising Campaign for Delta State is in full swing, and we are beyond the 60% mark toward our goal of \$50 million. I was very pleased that we could provide a two and a half percent pay raise to all full-time employees, and that we were also able to elevate the compensation level for equity and market reasons for 140 faculty and staff positions.

In the service of our students, our people are our greatest assets and resources, and we will do everything possible not only to protect you and your positions, but to improve your compensation and benefits whenever possible. I am proud of you and what we are doing at Delta State to provide our students with a great education and the opportunities of a lifetime. That is our collective mission, and it should also be our passion. It is certainly mine, because I well remember, and am grateful for, the outstanding education and experiences I had here as a student a half century ago, and because this mission is so important to current and future generations of college students.

I ask you now to join me in reflecting on the lives and contributions of our recently deceased colleagues, students, and friends who served Delta State so well: Ms. Katherine Hobart Adams; Ms. Lillian Andrews, Ms. Amanda Jane Baker, Dr. Thomas N. Boschert; Dr. Janie Allen Bradley; Dr. Ray Bridges; Dr. Ralph Brown; Mr. Sam Byrd; Ms. Cynthia Borgognoni Cocilova; Ms. Deborah Pittman Cox; Mr. Lee Curry; Mrs. Fay Davidson; Mr. Pat Denton; Ms. Kay Dockery; Mrs. Evelyn Turner Echols; Ms. Betsy Bobo Elliott; Dr. Mary (Kay Kay) Elliott and her husband, Dr. Robert Elliott; Ms. Debra Ferguson and her husband, Mr. Owen Taylor; Mr. Noel Funchess; Mr. Shane Garrard; Dr. Bryce Griffis; Ms. Marjorie Hackney; Ms. Courtney LaShay James Haynes; Dr. Gary Hemphill; Mr. Sam Henderson; Ms. Bonnie Horton; Mr. James Wilson Jacks, Sr.; Ms. Fayrene West Johnson; Mr. Jasper Johnson; Mr. Robert Johnston; Mr. Artie Kamien; Ms. Amy Buckles Klein; Ms. Louise Lindsey; Ms. Diane Makamson; Ms. Rose "Took" Mason;

Mr. Jim Hunter McCaleb; Mr. Steve McClellan; Ms. Lucille McCool; Representative Nolan Mettetal; Mr. Ollie Mohamed, Jr.; Representative John L. Pearson, III; Ms. Theresa Holloway Pearson; Mr. Jack Phillips; Ms. Michele Reed; Ms. Terry Simmons; Dr. Don Skelton; Dr. Ted Solomon; Mr. Leland Speed; Ms. Stephanie Brown Stevens; Dr. Richard “Dick” Strahan; Ms. Barbara Varner; Mr. Ronnie L. Vaughn III; Mr. John Wilson; Governor William Winter and his wife, Mrs. Elise Varner Winter; and, Dr. Leila Wynn. Please join me in a moment of silence in their memory.

As we reflect on all that happened this past year, in the midst of the pandemic at that, I wonder how we could top what we just experienced in terms of “out-of-the ordinary” for a university enterprise. I know you share my excitement that we are back. And, now, we must ask, “what next?”

For starters, I have two sure bets for you in the “what next” category. We have experienced two major turnovers in the university executive corps. I am very pleased to welcome and introduce to you two “who next” professionals who have joined the Delta State team: Dr. Andy Novobilski, our new Provost and Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and Dr. Eddie Lovin, our new Vice-President for Student Affairs. Gentlemen, please stand and be recognized.

Dr. Novobilski takes over as Provost for Dr. Charles McAdams, who retired after serving seven and a half years with great distinction. Dr. Lovin assumes the Student Affairs Vice Presidency following the departure of Dr. Vernell Bennett-Fairs, who left Delta State to serve as President of Lemoyne-Owen College in Memphis, and following outstanding interim service by Dr. Kurt Keppler, who served in the Student Affairs role for the spring term.

Both of our new Vice Presidents have hit the ground running, and have been fully engaged in their respective portfolios and duties since July 1. They are terrific additions to our leadership team, and I want them to know we welcome them with open arms and all the green swag they can handle or wear. They are already helping us to determine “what’s next” for the university, and providing us with leadership to new

levels of excellence and success.

These two new Vice Presidents are key members of the President's Cabinet that also includes: Dr. Michelle Roberts, Vice President for Executive Affairs and Chief of Staff; Mr. Jamie Rutledge, Vice President for Finance and Administration and Chief Financial Officer; Mr. Rick Munroe, Vice President for University Advancement and External Relations; Mr. Mike Kinnison, Director of Athletics; Mr. Will Young, Student Government Association President; Dr. Vicki Bingham, Dean of the Robert E. Smith School of Nursing and Representative of the Academic Council; Ms. Nakikke Wallace, Chair of the Administrative Staff Council; and, Dr. Andrew Wegmann, President of the Faculty Senate. I am fortunate to be surrounded by a very talented group of colleagues, and I thank each of them for their service to Delta State.

Before moving on to more "what's next" items, I'd like to share with you a peek into the treasure chest of the many good things that happened this past year — far too many to mention today. So, be sure to check out the full list at www.deltastate.edu/president/accomplishments. What follows is a diverse sampling of just a few of the university's accomplishments and successes during the previous year.

As for campus building projects and renovations,

- We completed the Sillers Coliseum re-roofing, HVAC system, and upgrade to the lighting system.
- Roofing projects for the Wright Art building and the Smith Facilities Management building were completed.
- Phase I of the sidewalk replacement project around the Nowell Union was completed.
- The first phase of planning for an addition and the renovation of the Nursing facility was completed.
- Major renovations of Lawler-Harkins, Cain-Tatum, and Fugler-Hammett residence halls were completed, and are ready for our incoming students.

- A major project to repair or replace all elevators on campus is underway, and should be completed by October.
- We are replacing roofing for Lawler-Harkins, Cain-Tatum, Fugler-Hammett, Ward Hall, Brumby-Castle, Scott Hall, and the Digital Media Arts Lab.
- Repurposing of several areas in the Nowell Union is underway, including the addition of a game room for students.
- We are moving the convenience store in the Dining Hall back to the Nowell Union.
- In the technology arena, we replaced more than 600 outdated computers for faculty, staff, and students.
- And, we completed the building of the new President's residence, moved in the last week in February, and held a dedication and open house in May. Because of the new COVID-19 surge, we are postponing the back-to-school luncheon that was scheduled for tomorrow. However, I hope to host all of you at the President's home later in the fall for that rescheduled event. Likewise, the Chamber of Commerce's annual "welcome back" reception, previously scheduled for later this afternoon, has been postponed until it's safe to gather socially.

In the category of academics,

- Professor Leslie Stewart served as President of the Mississippi Political Science Association.
- DMI bands performed at Statesmen Kickback, Juke Joint Festival, GRAMMY Museum MS Live on the Lawn/MTV Turns 40 Weekend, and the Delta Soul Charity Golf Tournament.
- Languages and Literature's new Bachelor of Arts curriculum was successfully implemented, and will expand the range of offerings and

deepen student engagement with English-language literatures and world literatures in translation.

- Social Work implemented the first cohort in the new Child Advocacy Studies Certificate Program, and initiated development of a new Delta Children's Advocacy Center.
- Speech and Hearing students performed more than 50 hearing tests this past semester on DSU students and community members.
- Four art faculty members — Robyn Wall, Jesse Brown, Nathan Pietrykowski and Will Jacks — and one alumnus, Lawson King, were selected to showcase their work this fall at the Mississippi Invitational exhibition at the Mississippi Museum of Art.
- In Chemistry, Dr. Joseph Bentley was selected as the S.E. Kossman Outstanding Teacher.
- In Music, students Yeim Kim and Cameron Sullivan earned first and second place recognition, respectively, in the Solo Piano Division at the Mississippi Music Teachers Association Collegiate Competitions.
- The College of Business and Aviation obtained reaffirmation of the Bachelor of Commercial Aviation degree with the Aviation Accreditation Board International, and completed construction of the state-of-the-art Financial Investing and Research Lab.
- The College of Business and Aviation was awarded a \$1,050,000, 2.5 year grant from the Kellogg Foundation to establish a Minority Women Business Center, and a \$240,000 USDA grant to begin operations of the Business Assistance Center.
- Dr. Tomeka Harbin was selected as Delta State University's nominee for the IHL Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion Award.
- The College of Education and Human Sciences gained approval of two new

Specialist programs that will begin fall 2021 — the Educational Specialist in Curriculum and Instruction and the Educational Specialist in Higher Education.

- The Counselor Education Program received full eight-year accreditation for its programs from the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and the Hamilton-White Child Development Center received full accreditation through 2026 from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). All educator preparation programs were fully recognized by the Mississippi Department of Education through 2027.
- The School of Nursing was granted 10 years of continued accreditation for all of its nursing programs from the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) Board of Commissioners. The School of Nursing reports an RN state licensing passing rate of 97%, and a nurse practitioner pass rate of 100%, and it boasts a U.S. News Best Online Master's Program shout-out, and a nationally recognized Most Affordable Doctor of Nursing Practice program, as well.
- Based on annual Institutional Research surveys, the Roberts-LaForge Library once again garnered approval from more than 90% of students and faculty expressing their great satisfaction with library staff.
- From the University Archives, film footage, programs, photographs, and the assistance of University Archivist Emily Jones provided the foundation for the recently released documentary *The Queen of Basketball*, a production focusing on the career of Delta State basketball great Lucy Harris, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York City, and will be shown on campus on September 13th.
- Our Graduate School enrollment was the single bright light of increased numbers this past year of COVID-19, with a 3.9% increase in the fall, and

an 8.6% increase in the spring. And, the Teach For America Graduate Fellows program will continue with a new grant from the Hearin Foundation.

- The Student Success Center had another great year, and helped fill in a lot of gaps for students during the stressful year of COVID-19. Academic support services continued with a redesigned academic support lab, new funding for the free, 24/7 tutoring service for students, and implementation of the Student Navigators Program.
- In International Education, Delta State has been selected as one of nine new Japan Outreach Initiative (JOI) host sites by the Laurasian Institute for a fully-funded Japanese cultural educator who will be on campus next year.
- The Gertrude C. Ford Center for Teaching and Learning is garnering some attention, as evidenced by the invitation Director Gray Kane received earlier this summer to make a presentation on the topic of online education to international and domestic VIPs at a conference sponsored by the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce.
- In Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning, Director Chrisa Mansell served as Treasurer and Webmaster for the Mississippi Association of Institutional Research.
- The Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, a cultural heritage development partnership with the National Park Service that is managed by The Delta Center for Culture and Learning on campus, has generated nearly \$4 million in direct federal and state grants to the university since 2010. The latest news is that ours is the first of the 55 National Heritage Areas Congressionally-designated to be added to the African American Civil Rights Network, which highlights key Civil Rights heritage development opportunities for the Mississippi Delta region in tourism,

education, and interpretation.

- The Delta Center for Culture and Learning’s “Most Southern Place on Earth” workshop has been funded for an 11th year, and will resume next summer after being postponed due to the pandemic. Over the 11-year period, the workshop has brought approximately \$2 million in National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant funds to Delta State.
- Delta State’s 7th Annual International Conference on the Blues took the form of a virtual presentation in partnership with Mississippi Delta Blues Festival Brazil Online, a global festival that included performances from Holland, Australia, France, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and the United States, including our own DMI alumnus Keith “Prince of the Delta Blues” Johnson, great nephew of Blues legend Muddy Waters. This fall’s conference will be held in person on campus in early October.

In the areas of University Advancement, fundraising, and alumni relations,

- The Centennial Capital Campaign continues to progress with great success and more than 60% of our goal already raised.
- The Foundation sponsored a successful and fun high-end donor gala last month, and boasts the creation of a dozen new endowment funds.
- Despite the effects of COVID-19 this past year, annual fundraising is up \$400,000 to \$3.2 million; we had 500 more donors than last year; and, thanks to a robust market, our endowment increased 34% to \$39 million.
- We are engaging our alumni through mentoring opportunities offered on the “DSU Connects” app.
- And, quite notably, Pig Pickin’ is back and is slated for September 11th, as is Homecoming on October 30th.

In the world of athletics,

- Despite COVID-19 preventing or shortening a lot of competition, we had some outstanding highlights.
- Both men's and women's swim/dive teams finished in the top ten in the NCAA national meet, and two of our women swimmers and two of our men swimmers won national championships! That is huge!
Congratulations to Lucia Martelli, Celeste Turner, Giulio Brugnoni, and Emanuel Fava.
- We can also boast 12 All American Honors in swim/dive.
- Men's tennis and baseball both made NCAA Regional Appearances.
- Two of our student-athletes were selected as Gulf South Conference Commissioner's Top Ten Finalists: Kailyn Lofton from softball and Hayden White from baseball.
- The Charles S. Kerg Senior Athlete of the Year Honors went to national champion swimmers Lucia Martelli and Giulio Brugnoni.
- Baseball second baseman Jake Barlow was selected for All American honors, as were Men's Tennis stars Emile Le Terrier and Trey Seymour.
- Former Lady Statesman basketball phenom Debbie Brock became the third Lady Statesmen to be enshrined into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.

In the student affairs area,

- The Interim Vice President restructured the admissions office, and put in place a more strategic approach to student recruitment.
- The division established a Behavior Intervention Team program.
- A student union renovation committee began work on a plan to reimagine the union and its layout and function.

- \$2 million in CARES funds were allocated and paid to needy students affected by the pandemic.

In the executive affairs area,

- Delta State partnered with the Mississippi State Department of Health, Bolivar County, City of Cleveland, and the Bolivar Medical Center Foundation to host a drive-through COVID-19 vaccination site, which resulted in more than 2,200 people being fully vaccinated.
- The system for redesigning the university's scholarship program and policies is in the final stages, and I am pleased to announce that the new system will be fully implemented this academic year. Once complete, Delta State will have a fully automated and streamlined Scholarship Management System that is coordinated with all units across campus and provides timely and accurate university and foundation scholarship information to departments and students.

And, from my office,

- We revamped our diversity efforts on campus, and re-established the position of Coordinator of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to facilitate the success of under-represented students and employees, coordinate the university's diversity initiatives, including serving as Chair of the University's Diversity Committee, and focus on enhancing equity, diversity, and inclusion within the university community.
- And, we proudly raised a new state flag on the Delta State campus.

So, "what's next" for the university and the academy? What can we expect, and what should we think about? Certainly a return to a modicum of normalcy will mean lots of status quo activity, and a return to face-to-face classes as much as possible, which should please most students, faculty, and staff, not to mention parents of students. And, we do need to be very vigilant about the COVID-19 surge we now face.

But, what beyond that?

As a mini-dive into the realm of higher education “big think,” I would like to probe a couple of areas that lie at the very heart of our mission and purpose — teaching and students.

As we consider where the academy is going and how it’s changing, it might be instructive to inquire and evaluate among ourselves just what it is that we do best at Delta State? You might rightfully suggest teaching, of course. You might also proffer the qualities of personal attention and extra time for our students, ample student guidance, professional advice, and career mentoring — all very good, relevant, and important. But, to drill down for a moment on the teaching part, perhaps a salient question is “teaching what?” And by that, I don’t mean course content. That, of course, is prescribed or suggested according to a specific discipline, course goals, and projected outcomes, and, within the context of the concept and practice of academic freedom. It is outlined in course syllabi. What I’m getting at is the view from the stands and the public perspective — what is the proper scope of what we teach, and do, in our classes for our students?

Dr. Stanley Fish, the noted author of the book, Save the World on Your Own Time, says the answer is simply two things. Faculty should: 1) impart knowledge to students; and, 2) equip them with analytical skills to apply to their careers and professions. That’s it. All other values, virtues, lessons, messages, experiences, ideologies, and behavioral traits, he says, are incidental to, and beyond, the key role of the university.

Query: Should faculty, other than by example, be in the business of trying to inculcate students with moral character, respect for others, cultural mores, and political sensitivities or leanings? Meaning, should any of that sort of non-course subject matter be included in the delivery of course content, other than, perhaps, through a scholarly analysis of a cultural or social condition or point of view within the subject matter scope and context of a particular course?

Said another way, beyond delivering specific course content in a given field, should professors hold themselves out as moralists, political experts, and agents of change — whether there is a connection to their field or not? It seems to me that if instructors go down that path, they are skating ever so dangerously close to proselytizing and focusing instruction on personal, political, or ideological themes. I would ask, does it benefit the student or university for a professor to opine on his or her own personal views in class about conservative or liberal politics...on the good or evil of immigration policy...on the morality of abortion...on the fairness of our economic system...on the state or lack of social justice in America? That is not to say such issues should not be discussed in courses where the subject matter is properly part of the topical content and course focus. But, even then, the pedagogical goal should be a lesson of information, knowledge, understanding, and analysis, rather than an attempt to persuade the student-learner to adopt one side of an issue or the other.

So, I would agree with Dr. Fish, the author, that, “neither a university as a collective nor its faculty as individuals should advocate personal, political, moral, or any other kind of views except academic views.” As the old adage advises, shouldn’t we be about the business of teaching students *how* to think rather than *what* to think about the knowledge imparted to them and issues of the day?

As we ponder “what next” for the university and especially the academy, how closely to these precepts *do we*, or *should we*, adhere? What is the best model? What do you think? Is it what I have just outlined briefly, or something else? From my professional perspective, I like Professor Fish’s aspiration, when he writes: “I want an academy inflected by no one’s politics, but by the nitty-gritty obligations of teaching and research.” There you have it!

It is my hope, and my charge to our faculty, that you are laser-focused on your field of inquiry and expertise as you confer knowledge and skills to your students. As I use to tell my students during my thirty years of teaching at George Washington University, if you want me to share ideas with you about saving the world, our republic,

the environment, the whales, major league baseball, or your souls, perhaps I should meet you for coffee in the union or in a chat room. The idea is to mentor and advise students, as we should, but stick to the script in your courses, and, then, give them the extra “punch,” if you choose to do so, outside the classroom. Advise their student organizations and them personally, be available for student consultation and tutorials, cheer student-athletes at their games and meets, participate in cultural and social programming on campus, engage with your students in academic honor societies and religious organizations, and offer inspiration to your charges. Isn't it preferable and wiser to make those endeavors distinctive add-ons to your obligation to keep courses and the classroom experience scholarly and truly academic in nature?

My guess and observation are that we do a pretty good job on this campus in this area of inquiry, but many universities around the country venture off track, and invite criticism from a cynical public — sometimes fair and sometimes not — that higher education is missing its designated mark, and departing from its basic mission. Just fodder for thought...and for your faculty discussions tomorrow and throughout the year.

What's next regarding our students? What about them? Who are they, and of what kind of stuff are they made?

A timely inquiry and concern that has been around for a few years is, “Are we educating a generation of “snowflakes” who will be part of a “softening” of America?” I worry about that sometimes. And, I'm concerned that higher education, in some places — but hopefully not here — may be enabling recent and new generations of students to have an over-exaggerated sense of a need for “safety” to protect themselves against ideas, free expression, and scholarly debate — the so-called rise of the concept and culture of “safetyism” around the country that seemed to begin just about the time I started my service here in 2013.

Are we coddling and overprotecting our students? I hope not, and I don't think we do that here. But, some schools are. Bizarre cases at universities abound coast to

coast. In their book, The Coddling of the American Mind, authors Lukianoff and Haidt write about what they describe as three “Great Untruths”: 1) the untruth of fragility (what doesn’t kill you will make you weaker); 2) the untruth of emotional reasoning (always trust your feelings); and, 3) the untruth of “us versus them” (that life is a battle between good and evil people). The authors make a good case that those who subscribe to these three misdirected untruths are helping to “soften” and “poison” the next generation of youth, who essentially are actually quite resilient, and not fragile at all; who need to think objectively and critically, not just with an emotional response that feels good; and, who need to learn that the world is not just about binary “us versus them” narratives.

It is important for us as a university to be firm in our resistance to increasing intolerance of opposing viewpoints or issues that simply make us — and our students — uncomfortable. We see far too much of that attitude in a large part of our society that refuses to distinguish facts and truth from myths and lies, and seems to adopt as gospel that every issue lends itself to a binary narrative — good or bad; right or wrong; left or right; liberal or conservative.

As a university, we are a bastion of free speech, and a mecca for the exploration and discussion of every conceivable societal issue. That will remain our culture, at least on my watch. As one professor put it, “No one should have to pass someone else’s ideological purity test to be allowed to speak. University life — along with civic life — dies without the free exchange of ideas.” Consequently, how we teach our students to learn and to think is so important. As we teach them subject matter and how to think in our course content delivery, we are also teaching them, through methodology and context, how to deal with political differences, social injustice, truth versus falsehoods, and the challenges they will face in a world that can be difficult to understand and navigate, and in a society that is rife with the notion and realities of culture wars. Similarly, programs and events outside the classroom — such as our various conferences on race, international business, counseling, social work, and the blues; university colloquia; student organization events; and, a host of multi-cultural and

social events hosted on campus — should provide those lessons on a different, yet important level, while reflecting respect for free speech, intellectual inquiry, and open discussion.

We are told that we are engaging now with the so-called iGen generation of students — the internet generation — those born between 1995 and 2012. As the Coddling book authors note, these students are the first to grow up with the internet in their pockets. The authors suggest that the social lives of average American teens changed radically between 2007 and 2012 with the proliferation of social media platforms that have become almost an addiction for their users. The former president of Facebook even admitted that, in building social media platforms, the idea was, “how could we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?” As a result, iGen is the first generation to spend its formative teenage years immersed in social media and the use of smartphones and other electronic devices.

Another author, Jean Twenge, a social psychologist, offers that children grow up more slowly today, and that transitional milestone events like a part-time job, driving a car, and dating are happening later for many kids. No surprise to any of us, many young people spend a lot of time alone with their devices and screens. Thus, they arrive at college having spent less time, than previous generations, being outside, going out with friends, socializing in person, and being unsupervised by a parent or other adult — all of which delays their ability to grow up and mature as a young adult. Twenge says that “18 year olds now act like 15 year olds use to...teens are physically safer than ever, yet they are more mentally vulnerable.” So, we are seeing that many of these young people suffer anxiety and depression, and this university and others across the country will likely face a major challenge this fall in dealing with student mental health needs, especially given the sequestered nature of the last year and a half.

Certainly “helicopter” and paranoid parenting has contributed to the onset of “safetyism,” but child development experts, including our own on this campus, will tell us that children are naturally antifragile, so overprotection can make them weaker and

less resilient later in their development. As a university, we certainly don't need to be providing a culture of so-called "safetyism" that exacerbates this situation. Free play is what's needed for growing children...let them have a little space and unsupervised time. And free time and speech and expression and movement to explore and learn, even occasionally at one's peril perhaps, are what are needed at the college stage. As a student, I certainly experienced that environment on this very campus, and I wish that for today's students as well, just with a much higher level of technology and sophistication.

For our part as the university professionals mentoring new generations of college students, we should be careful in our zeal to provide and protect them so as not to overdo it by creating rules and regulations that have a chilling effect on speech or set up some standard meant in good faith, but misdirected, to protect our students from an incident of emotional discomfort or other real-world lesson that all of us know actually builds character and prepares us for the real world. Some of us call it common sense and real-world reality. We need to keep all that in mind as we prepare our students to enter a society that badly needs their thoughtful contributions and engagement.

A quote worth pondering from the authors of Coddling: "Something is going badly wrong for American teenagers, as we can see in the statistics on depression, anxiety, and suicide. Something is going very wrong on many college campuses, as we can see in the growth of a call-out culture, in the rise in efforts to disinvite or shout down visiting speakers, and in changing norms about speech, including a recent tendency to evaluate speech in terms of safety and danger. This new culture of "safetyism" and vindictive protectiveness is bad for students and bad for universities."

How about these as positive traits of a forward-thinking university, again from the authors of Coddling: a high tolerance for vigorous disagreement, but no tolerance for violence or intimidation; a presumption that students are antifragile, but with the recognition that many of them need support in their quest for emotional growth; an institutional climate in which all community members can depend on freedom of

inquiry, and on differences and disagreements being productively explored; and, finally, a community where everyone knows they are physically safe and that they belong? How do we at Delta State stack up?

I believe that we have that profile pretty much in place at Delta State, and I encourage all of us to nurture the growth and development of that culture in every way possible — for our students and for ourselves. What are our challenges going forward? Relevance? Curricula? Technology? Stable enrollment numbers? Student preparedness? Access to college? Tuition? Public support? Private support? These are some of the critical points for consideration in higher education generally, and certainly as we approach our centennial. In your meetings and deliberations, as well as in your private water cooler conversations, I urge you to discuss these issues, and contribute to the narrative as we reimagine our academic roles and build a better university. Don't be afraid of upsetting the status quo. Just because we did something yesterday doesn't mean it's sacrosanct now or in the future. Again, I share these perspectives as food for thought.

As former U.S. Senator Bob Kerrey notes in his foreword to the book, Building the Intentional University, "...most Americans do not understand the role played by the voluntary system of regulating colleges and universities. Most do not understand the importance of regional accreditation in determining the quality and the cost of college. Most do not understand how academic and administrative decisions get made inside U.S. colleges. As a consequence, they do not appreciate how difficult it can be to make even obviously good decisions that would improve outcomes. And, most do not understand how important the boards of governors of colleges and universities are in supporting academic leaders when they do what good leaders do: make difficult choices they believe will improve their institution." On this campus, we make those choices every day, and each and every one of those decisions is guided by the mantra "what is best for Delta State University."

As I wrap up, I would like to share a few comments about vision. Vision: a

snapshot of what Delta State can be in the future and in the service of our students.

Vision: what we believe our priorities should be as we build our future together.

Vision: how we should apply our resources to the planning and execution of key strategies necessary to reach our goals. Vision: where we want to be in the year of our centennial in 2025 and beyond.

For a quick moment, if you will, please travel with me, in your imagination, to a future year to see how vision can play out. It is 2027 — six years from now — and we are looking back at some terrific things that have happened at Delta State since 2021...a “Top 10” list:

1. What a wonderful centennial celebration we had in 2025! The return of so many alumni and friends to campus breathed new life into this 100-year old institution, and made us all proud. Our endowment soared to \$60 million.
2. Through the generosity of three families who made seven-figure gifts to our foundation endowment, new family scholarships now provide financial support to more than 400 students who otherwise might not have the opportunity to go to college.
3. Thanks to prudent use of bond money and a major gift from a loyal alumnus, the Delta State Honors College, located in old Ward Hall next door to the Nowell Union, just celebrated its third year, with cohorts of 60 high-achieving students, three of whom received Goldwater, Truman, and Fulbright postgraduate scholarships.
4. Delta State’s Student Success Center is celebrating its 15th year of providing top-flight supplemental academic assistance to hundreds of students each year, and their programs have helped us reach a new 4-year graduation rate of 65%.
5. Now in its 33rd year, the Bologna Performing Arts Center was just recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts for its year-round

youth educational programming, and crowned its year with a performance by Ringo Starr and his All-Star Band.

6. Last year, the Delta Music Institute honored its second DSU alumna who won a GRAMMY for best new song that was recorded in Studio A on the Fighting Okra label.
7. Delta State's Heritage, Cultural, and Visitors Center in the old Hugh White Stadium dormitory hosted more than 5,000 visitors last year, who were here on campus for ball games, cultural events, Delta Center programs, alumni meetings, conferences, and tours of the campus after visiting the GRAMMY Museum.
8. The first animated video game developed and produced by a student in our Digital Media Arts Center reached national and international markets, and topped the sales charts among all video games last year.
9. Delta State's nursing program, with the facility addition back in 2023, increased its size by 80 nursing students, and is the leading provider of nurses in the Delta and beyond.
10. In the last two years alone, Delta State's Center for Global Engagement, which is located in the old Cleveland Hall and was established thanks to a generous gift from an alumna, has hosted a record 350 international students from 60 countries, has supported 200 DSU students who studied abroad, has assisted 10 faculty members to become Fulbright Scholars teaching and researching overseas, and has facilitated visiting scholars and artists from 14 different countries.

Did you enjoy that magical trip into the future? Are those realistic goals? Vision: whatever our minds can conceive, we can achieve. With smart planning, continuing support from the state, a robust enrollment, generous alumni benefactors, and your engagement, every part of the dreamscape I described is possible. Together, let's make that vision for tomorrow a reality starting today.

Finally, as you commence your work for the semester, I encourage you to shed any remnants of “average” or “mediocrity” that might be lingering around your department or office. People and institutions tend to gravitate toward one of three directions or conditions — 1) excellence, 2) mediocrity, or 3) oblivion. And, the most dangerous is mediocrity because it’s so comfortable and easy. In everything you do, make success and excellence your hallmark. Be a winner, and help our students become winners. Don’t settle for average or mediocre. Ensure that your work is excellent so you can proudly put your name on it.

I wish for each of you a rewarding and productive year, and I charge you to continue serving and lifting up Delta State every day with all the zest you can muster, as we prepare the next generation for the ever-changing challenges of the real world.

Cheers!