President’s Message

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(This text reflects the annual claim that, like the congressional record, the text is subject to revision—from the somewhat abbreviated spoken presentation).

Good Morning. This event is part of an institutional effort to find a way to feel normal—but these clearly are not normal times. I for one do not believe anyone believes that this should seem normal. Nonetheless, we must make efforts in these not normal times to create benchmarks to identify where we are and where we can be—and to try to strike a balance now between caution and concern, and find some small ways to build ground for confidence and hope.

I will try to do that in two ways here, knowing we will be participating in a continued shared effort to make sense of what is not normal. Nevertheless, we will advance with the knowledge that even in a very significantly “hybrid world,” we will pursue our shared commitment to learning. I begin with a few notes of campus accomplishments.

Since second week in March, we have been a community shared not by physical connections, but mediated communications, and shared commitments to learning and student success, and connections

Before the university moved on-line in March, the **Atlanta Journal Constitution** once again—based on the votes of faculty and staff, named Clayton State University a top workplace in metropolitan Atlanta. Dr. Jelani Favors has been nationally recognized for his intellectual leadership in identifying the role of HBCU’s in the US, that often, to cite Dr. Favors: ”…producing idealism and ultimately spawning a rebellion that revitalized the concept of freedom and democracy for all Americans.” The Society for Student Resource Management, led by Dr. Kenneth Kungu and Dr. Leon Prieto, was lauded nationally as a student chapter of distinction. We congratulate Dr. David Williams for his selection as chair of the faculty senate, and Dr. Mark Watson for his service over the last 2 years. The Masters of Public Administration program, as well and the Masters of Business Administration programs continue to drive growth in Graduate programs at the university. Although begun prior to our movement on-line, the university began the work of the President’s Campus Committee on Inclusion and Engagement, led by Drs. Demmitt and Abdullah, and HR Director Byrd to fashion structural and systematic examination of the ways in which we interact and thus learn across campus differences. Significant modifications in our strategies to conduct searches for positions across the campus is one substantive example of the likely long-term success of this group and these activities.

The CARES act transferred from the US Federal Government a bit over $6 million to be managed by the University. Vice Presidents Cummings and Schultheis led the implementation effort here on campus. Nearly half of that amount was required by the US Department of Education to be transferred directly to affected students based on relative financial need—the remainder allocated to parts of the university in which revenues were eliminated by the rapid transition to on-line learning, or where costs directly related to addressing the pandemic, such as cleaning supplies and expenditures. These were clearly not sufficient to compensate for all institutional costs—and why many of us are hopeful that support for higher education and state and local governments will be part of any next step in Federal action in this pandemic.

The last six months have seen us face as a nation simultaneous events—a financial crisis of nearly unprecedented proportions, a start of a reckoning with 400 years of racial injustice, a health crisis of proportions not faced in more than 100 years, and an election year seen as fundamentally consequential to all, almost regardless of political beliefs. Our institution seeks to address the continuity of advancing our core business of learning for students, faculty, staff and community alike, all while adjusting to and negotiating with, the conditions we face. Therefore, in the second part of this presentation, I wish to identify three significant conditions facing us this year. Any one of them alone would be challenging. All three together will be formidable, even as I am convinced that we will as a campus find ways to address them.

The first of these are budgetary challenges. Georgia faced significant reductions in economic activity and state revenue, leading to a 10% reduction in state general fund support (better than the 14% initially feared, but not the end of budget reductions this year). We will be hosting open meetings over the next few months, as the budget picture emerges. Much of that picture locally will be affected by enrollments for fall and spring, which continue to evolve this week and next. On a positive note, state allocations for campus major renovations and repairs grew for next year. The institution also received $3 million in bond funding to address long-term improvements in water and sewer infrastructure. My thanks to Jim Flowers and Micheal Little for their assistance with gaining legislative support for this work. The Georgia Economy started the downturn in a better financial position than most states. Nonetheless, it may be a few years for us to recover from this recent downturn. Again, we will be sharing that information in teams meetings in the coming weeks, seeking some collective wisdom to address this first significant university challenge. Given that the Governor has already announced the possibility for a special session this fall to address budget issues, these open meetings will be quite important.

The second significant challenge (and opportunity) reflects an emerging social context for learning. Racial justice has always been central to Clayton State, but is contextualized with a greater and broader public awareness. We all come to grips with the reality of 400 years in this country of racial injustice. The vital role we are playing and must continue to play in combating economic structural racism must emerge from our core business of learning and student success. In macro-economic terms, we must continue work to reduce the level of debt, and to increase the graduation rates for all of our students, but especially African American students. All forms of racism must be opposed. But universities like ours must be especially focused on our core business of learning that provides the educated citizens who will continue work for not just now, but for generations.

Success here is using our core business of learning and our shared commitment to finding ways to support student success to address this. If we are not taking attendance and finding ways for our student success, we threaten continued low levels of graduation. If we are not actively seeking out students to act in partnership with us for their academic success through advising, supplemental instruction, we are threatening low levels of student success. If we do not find ways to early in a term assess student-learning progress, and direct those students to places where their success can be enhanced, we are threatening low levels of student success. Progress has been made—**NYT** and Urban research center indicates CSU students have a 13% higher performance in graduation than that predicted by race, income, gender, age, social class—but we must do better.

If Andrew Young is correct, the leaders of movements for racial equality will come not only from movement leaders, but will come from emerging African American leaders successful in the economic realm. His explicit reference to the women founders of Slutty Vegan as examples of that leadership (now with a restaurant in Jonesboro) I believe is no accident in its connection to our service area. Individuals among us will fight racism in their own ways. But as a university, a constant and continued focus on student graduation and success (and central to the university’s mission and planning goals) must be the most significant means we have to fight economic barriers to racial justice, identified recently by the President of the Atlanta Federal Reserve Board. Moreover, as noted earlier, the committee on inclusion and engagement will help lead campus review of other work to be done in this pursuit.

The third significant disruption to our operations clearly comes from the public health environment for learning we all face with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since last April, 12 groups of faculty, staff and students framed proposals that would guide our plans for safe return to campus. More than 50 campus citizens met (by TEAMS) several times weekly since April to provide planning updates, and advance probing questions that improved the plans and the processes. The resulting campus strategy mapped plans on three fronts—technical, personal, and social.

For the technical—we created separation of seating, shielding in various places, access to sanitation and hand washing, reinforcement of improvement in ventilation, spacing of the scheduling of classes to avoid lines and allow for more frequent cleaning. We continue to develop plans for contact tracing where individuals contract COVID-19, and are place in isolation.

For the personal--we advance responsibilities for taking care of ourselves—masks, social distance, washing our hands and using sanitizer on ourselves and on surfaces where we are working

For the social—we are responsible for the fate of others—and respect for others—we believe that this community will take care of each other—in instances in which individuals, even indoors, maintain social distance, and wear a face covering that covers nose and mouth, contagion risks are under 1%, according to research published in **Lancet**. Our ability to continue to work, live, and be together depends on shared social influence. We know this will not be easy—we miss spending time with each other, and enjoy coming well within each other’s personal space. But exerting social influence will ultimately determine whether we can continue to learn together while we maintain our health.

We will be facing significant and important challenges in the days and months ahead. But I remain of good cheer—excellent, as some might say—even now. The host of NPR’s **Hidden Brain** Shankar Vedatem in discussing the concept of identity observed that it came from good people trying to create an inclusive and better world. And even in these less than normal times, I believe we will continue to do so. I close with a statement from the late John Lewis, described by several as the most modest, and the strongest person, with whom they had encountered. “We all have to find a way to become more human — more kind, more thoughtful,” Lewis said. “Never become hostile, never become bitter. Keep the faith. It all will work out.”