A New Era of Excellence through Partnership

Good morning and a hearty welcome to the students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends of New Mexico State University. And welcome, too, to members of our Board of Regents, representatives of our state government and elected officials, and to our many partners across New Mexico in our businesses and industries and on our campuses and Extension sites, who may be joining us by video today. I wish to welcome, too, members of my family and my dear friends and mentors, many of whom traveled across the nation to be with my husband, Paul, and me today. I am deeply grateful to you all for coming to be part of this inaugural celebration.

Universities have long chosen to celebrate the inaugurations of presidents, and we have had many reasons to do so. Marking a new era with an inauguration helps us reflect on the history and purpose of the university, which, of course, has outlived and will continue to thrive beyond all of us who are here today. And the history of New Mexico State University is an especially proud one, bolstered by strong traditions of the peoples of this state and the defiant “dare to be different” attitude that has distinguished this “land of enchantment.” We have never been afraid to take on new research challenges and create innovative academic programs in our pursuit of excellence. Yet we will be challenged to do so during this decade, like never before, by the constraints of shrinking resources and increasing demands on our creative and educational services.

Research completed by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (or SHEEO) reports that state “appropriations per student remained lower in FY 2009 (in constant dollars) than in most years since FY 1980.” Our NMSU Instruction and General budget this year was cut by $12.3M, forcing us to raise tuition and cut services. We will be faced with an additional state budget shortage this fall, which will mean more cutbacks and greater burdens to be shared by students and families, and faculty and staff.
Twenty-four presidents before me have faced the challenges like this in the past, and with a variety of talents at their disposal. We have had many who were agricultural researchers, some who were education leaders, one who was a philosopher of religion, another who advanced bilingual language learning, and others who were geographers, sociologists, and economists. Some have had to face budget shortfalls—like me—and others have enjoyed times of budget riches. Some grew colleges from small departments and took on new campuses, and others have faced faculty unrest, ethnic tensions, and challenges from intense and determined board members. Some were successful for long years, others left in a hurry! But throughout the leadership of all our past presidents, this university and its faculty, students, and staff have pressed on. And from a small beginning in 1888 of three faculty members, including President Hadley, who mentored a brave group of just 40 pupils, we have together grown this university to five campuses of over 29,000, with nearly 4,000 faculty and staff, and garnering a research portfolio of over $185M annually. That success has come from the hard efforts of many—thinking, planning, and working together.

In the few minutes that I have today, I will chart for you a path for a new era of excellence at NMSU, excellence achieved through partnerships with our state, our friends and alumni, our businesses and industries, our public schools and fellow colleges, our cooperating departments and campuses, and our students, faculty, and staff who make us who we are.

We have been and should be proud of the diversity of this campus, mirroring the multicultural population of this state. We are the only land-grant, Hispanic-serving institution, with 48% of our students system-wide claiming that heritage and 4% of our students identify as Native Americans, 3% as Black, just under 2% of Asian heritage, and of course all the rest of us are immigrants to this nation founded by immigrants.
And recently, NMSU has increasingly welcomed international students from countries all over the world. In fact, NMSU now boasts over 1,800 international students, including permanent residents, across its five campuses, hailing from 65 countries.

New research by a scientist from the University of Michigan, my alma mater, on the paths to success in problem-solving, shows that diversity is the key to creating lasting and effective solutions to problems in our complex society. This professor’s research showed that: “[D]iverse groups of problem solvers outperformed the groups of the best individuals at solving problems. The reason: the diverse groups got stuck less often than the smart individuals, who tended to think similarly.” [New York Times quote, interview with Scott E. Page, January 8, 2008].

We are challenged in this nation now by our fear of difference, competition with others for resources, and a tendency to—quite frankly—hunker down and hang on to what we have lest it be taken away.

This limits our tolerance for accepting others, and constrains our efforts to ensure that all have access to the one resource that will move this society and all in it forward: education. Our land-grant mission obligates us to provide that education—and I directly quote from the land-grant act of 1862—“where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies . . . to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts . . . in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” Although our society has weathered civil and world wars and many other changes since 1862, we have never lost sight of this great American promise to provide a comprehensive college education to all who qualify. It is time now to bolster our pledge to ensure that right for all who are on our shores; we must: Strengthen our
commitment to diversity of faculty, staff, and students, anchoring our path to excellence in an unwavering commitment to access and tolerance.

Recently, we have been asked by our state to raise our admission standards, to provide classes and tuition only for those students who are clearly on a path to graduation, and these are admirable goals. We can save the state money by guaranteeing access only to students who can graduate in four or six years. And that’s a fair expectation, but only if we also assist the state in graduating more of our students from high school who are truly prepared for college and provide them with scholarships and academic support programs that allow them to complete college in a timely fashion.

We are proud to note that New Mexico’s system of higher education has more students enrolled in college upon graduating from our high schools than our peer average, but this is in part because we have low graduation rates from high school [LFC report, p.23]. And fewer of those who do come to college are completing degrees than the national average [p. 21]. In short, we are failing to give most students the one asset that gives them the best chance of improving their economic future—a college degree.

This year I am challenging our deans, our faculty, and our advisers to examine closely the barriers we put in front of students on their path to graduation: Do we require excessive pre-requisites, give too limited access to advisers, or provide inadequate assistance with scholarships and student loans? I am challenging our advisers and faculty to create a “mid-semester check” program for our freshmen that will ensure every freshman has been offered personal help to guide them to success early on. And I am challenging our partner presidents at our NMSU campuses in Dona Ana, Grants, Carlsbad, and Alamogordo to work with me, our deans, and our provost to create more straightforward academic program plans that lead students to choose majors earlier and select courses that help them complete their programs in a timely matter.
At the same time, we won’t prohibit our students from exploring their possibilities. With offerings in over 295 degree programs, it is not unusual that some of our students take their time to graduate, and some should. And we have so many excellent faculty, known for their outstanding teaching and their genuine care for student success! Our students deserve to get to know them.

My own partner in life, Paul, completed his bachelor’s degree with 214 credits, about 60 more than needed to graduate with a degree in Architecture from the University of Michigan. He just couldn’t get enough of introductory courses in anthropology, political science, art, and psychology—he loved them all. We don’t recommend that path as a model, but I will tell you, he is one very interesting guy, and he did graduate!

We need to help our students meet their own goals at the university, and develop a clear path toward graduation. I have also pledged to take the lead in this campaign. Yesterday, I spoke with our new freshman—numbering 2,124—and offered them a small token—a challenge coin. Those of you with military backgrounds know what that is: Challenge coins are given on important occasions that mark an achievement, a historic event, or an important recognition of status. In our case, we have given the coin as a challenge to our new students, the class of 2014, to graduate—on time, preferably! And we will assist them in that goal every step of the way. We pledge over the course of the next five years to: Make graduation “Goal #1” for our students and ensure demonstrable increases in student persistence in our degree and certificate programs.

While graduating our students is an expectation, we need to have goals that go beyond expectations, which stretch this great university to increase our research, academic, and creative partnerships to create a better future, not only for the students who are in our
care, but also for the state, the nation, and the world which has fast become accessible at our back door. NMSU is a relatively small land-grant, research university, yet we have a growing international footprint.

Our faculty contribute to the international solar survey, located in Sunspot; our students have had world acclaim for their competitions in model United Nations assemblies; and our artists in metal-working, ceramics, and painting are featured in world museums and exhibits. Our International Relations Institute, recently supported by a grant from our governor, brings top-flight experts to our campus and shares the research expertise of our faculty and students world-wide to address important and complex world-problems, such as global hunger, international and border security, and peaceful governance.

From expertise in growing and harvesting chiles and pecans to designing vehicles to explore the far reaches of space, we have faculty research to share world-wide and students to give the international experience they need to be competitive in New Mexico’s new and growing international industries. And we can do more. We can make this a more welcoming campus for our international students, ensuring their success in classes in English, and we can make it possible for every NMSU student to have an international experience, whether in our classrooms here or in study abroad. We are a global university now, preparing our students for a global citizenry. Our faculty experts can give them knowledge of other cultures, of languages, history, literature, and social structures to prepare them for this role. Tomorrow our campus will have the opportunity to engage with a panel of faculty who began a discussion of our international potential at the Regents Retreat that we held with our campus leadership in July. We need your help to create this new vision for NMSU, one where we: **Focus our international reach to prepare students for a global society and expand our land-grant teaching and research missions.**
While extending our reach to the world, we will not neglect the clear obligation we have to build the resources of our great state. We can do this by exploiting the dynamic chemistry of our “academic ecosystem,” building a greater future for our university and our nation. Gerald Thomas, one of our longest serving presidents—who is with us today—defined the special structure of our “academic ecosystem” that is the university.

The “system,” pictured as Dr. Thomas depicted it, appears on the screen before you; it feeds on our resource base of a substantial **physical plant** of classrooms, libraries, stadiums, residential, research and extension facilities across the state; our **biological resources** of students, faculty, staff, alumni, community, industry, and government partners, and friends; and our **financial resources** from students, our state, the federal government, donors, and others. These all bubble together in our academic climate, where, as President Thomas tells us, “issues emerge.” [Chapter 1; p.16, *The Academic Ecosystem*]

When the academic ecosystem works well, universities maximally engage their resource base to expand and preserve knowledge. And ultimately universities transfer that knowledge so that businesses, industries, governments, schools, and communities can thrive. The academic ecosystem isn’t a closed loop. Like the lightning rods in the thunder cloud of the academic climate where “issues emerge,” we reach out and touch, actually spark others to action. Our challenge to be that catalyst, create that spark, is big.

And it is high time for us to begin planning for big things again, just as another long-serving president, Roger B. Corbett, did when he involved the then New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts in creating what became known as the “Big Plan.” Bill Conroy, another great NMSU president, who is with us today, recently brought Corbett’s work to our attention in an article he wrote for the *Southern New*
Dr. Conroy informs us that Corbett’s philosophy was simple and effective. He engaged everyone in helping the college, in “being builders in contrast to criticizers,” reiterating “that the future of the school and their own future depended on development.” When Corbett started his tenure as president, he was met by significant faculty resistance. Instead of caving in to that pressure, he handed down the gauntlet, and asked everyone to get to work, and create a successful future for NMSU. [Corbett quoted in Conroy, SNMR, p. 53]

Today, I’d like to repeat that challenge to all of you—to “get to work” and create a new era of excellence for NMSU. I am calling on our faculty and executive leadership to create a research and economic development plan that links the scientific, social, literary, and artistic expertise of our faculty to academic programs that push our students to hone their skills and creative talents and become industry and community leaders, a plan that frees our faculty and staff to partner across our system and with the industries their programs serve to develop new ways to deliver our programs and build results that make a difference in our communities.

I have called on our provost to take charge of the “Living the Vision” plan, developing with our faculty annual power goals that will push us toward measurable results. And I have asked our vice presidents for research and economic development to work together with a task force that I will appoint to create a strategic plan for research and economic development that takes full advantage of the talent of our NMSU academic ecosystem.

I would like, too, to see an expanded vision for agriculture at NMSU, linking our extension mission to new demands for research and to faculty expertise university-wide, while keeping faith with those we have traditionally served so well. By completing this work, NMSU can indeed: Be the economic engine for New Mexico through linking and strengthening our research and economic development partnerships.
Doing big things when resources are tight is a challenge, but we must do them. State support for higher education nationally has been decreasing steadily for over a decade. And by 2020, many public universities in America will be almost wholly supported by tuition, gift and endowment funds, and funds from grants and contracts. With our current expenditure patterns, NMSU would be faced with decreasing our budget by 30 percent or more, should this prediction hold true.

This fall we will announce the membership and charge of a new Efficiency and Effectiveness task force on this campus, combining the best thinking of our faculty, staff, students, and business partners. We have so much to work with: five campuses that can combine and share their resources to eliminate duplication and focus on academic strengths; an extension system that can provide services to businesses and communities across the state; a burgeoning culture of artistic performance and resources for media production that can make this university a cultural center in Las Cruces with reach worldwide; a dynamic link between our agricultural research and education programs and the NMDA; and a research engine that connects us to world-class national laboratories. And, yes, we have an Athletics program that has shown great progress in the last year, in the academic achievement of our student athletes and on the field; we must make this program successful while continuing to decrease its dependence on base funding.

By making this powerful system of five campuses, 13 agricultural science centers and extension sites in every county truly hum, a secure future is in our hands. Our goal over the next five years must be to: **Achieve maximum effectiveness and efficiency in serving our communities and constituencies across our university system.** And we can reach this goal by thinking differently about what we do, generating new resources, and using what we have to support our top priorities.
Simultaneously, we need to get very serious about engaging with our friends and alumni to increase the financial security of this university; in short, we must: **Substantially increase our university endowment and alumni giving.** Two weeks ago, I joined our NMSU Foundation executive board and trustees in their summer retreat where we learned that NMSU will be celebrating the completion this fall of our first successful comprehensive campaign, raising more than $250M. I wish to thank the supporters, faculty, and staff for their help in exceeding our goal of $225M. And, at the same time, challenge us to do better. At last look, only 7% of the alumni at New Mexico State University contributed gifts of any size to the university, ranking us at the bottom out of 16 universities in our peer group [Living the Vision]. We now raise just over $10M a year on average in annual giving, where the average giving level for public research universities is $65M a year [*The Chronicle*, financial data, 2008-9]. We need greater alumni support and more friends who will invest in this great university.

Building donor and alumni support will depend on a far deeper engagement with our campus and our future, the kind of engagement that we see among the alumni, friends, staff, faculty, and students of the finest universities in our country—engagement that is anchored in loyalty to and love for this great university. Never before has it been more important than now for us to: **Build a culture of pride in partnership and achievement in our classrooms, studios, and laboratories and on our campuses, courts, and fields.**

I can tell you for sure that Paul and I have been bit by Aggie fever. From our first basketball game the weekend of January 2, just four days after we arrived in Las Cruces, when we donned mustachios to free Pistol Pete, and through many more home games following—every one of which our Aggies won, I might point out—we felt the spirit of this campus—a warmth, visible in the support of faculty and families, the zeal of our
student athletes, and the rockin’ rhythms of the Roadrunner Revue Basketball Band. Just a little more than a week later, I was honored to distribute awards to our faculty and staff for excellence in teaching and mentoring our students. And today, I am humbled by the outpouring of our university community, alumni, friends, and supporters across the state of New Mexico and their enthusiasm for the future of this great place.

I made a special request that we have here today with us our Regents Professors. The Regents Professorship was established in 2001 by our Board of Regents to recognize faculty who have made outstanding contributions to New Mexico State University in the areas of education, research, extension education and public service. The faculty whose names are passing by on our screen now have earned national recognition as teachers and scholars in their field. They epitomize pride in work, loyalty to the mission and goals of a land-grant, research university, and ambition to change students’ lives for the better. And today we will at the convocation following this event honor more faculty and staff for exemplary achievement. It starts with leaders like these, this pride of place, and extends to all whom they and our university community touch.

Over the next five years, we will work to make this a better place for our faculty to succeed as teachers and researchers, a better place where our staff can help students grow, and a more welcoming setting for the communities that come to depend on our artistic productions, our research and lectures, and our sports events to brighten their lives. We’ll begin that work by reminding ourselves of who we are, how we have worked together, and how we will partner with each other and our communities to secure a strong future. Perhaps you don’t feel that spirit yet. Sit back and relax, while we take you on a brief journey celebrating the path to excellence that our partnerships have carved for us and will take us into the future.
I thank you for having entrusted the future of New Mexico State University in part to me. And I wish to thank once again all who have been such a support to me: my husband, my sisters and brother, my teachers—one of whom is with us today—and, of course, my parents, Chester Zawacki and Angela Markowicz Zawacki, who passed away a few short years ago.

Thanks, mom and dad! If not for your love of learning, your expectation that we be nothing but the best, we could not be here today striving still for excellence, with hundreds of dedicated colleagues, friends, and supporters to help along the way.

As we celebrate the outstanding achievements of our faculty and staff in the award ceremony that fills the remainder of this program, I hope that you will reflect on the part you, too, will play in building a new era of excellence at NMSU.

Thank you for your kind attention and your personal support. Go Aggies!