President Ellen Junn, Ph.D.
2018 Spring Convocation
Tuesday, January 23, 2018

(remarks as prepared)

Good morning and welcome to the spring semester 2018!

It was a little less than a year ago that I was honored to be inaugurated as the 11th president of Stanislaus State. At that time, I asked you to imagine with me the future of Stan State.

For me, that first year was such a whirlwind of important moments: of building working relationships with faculty, staff, and administrators; / of discovering what is important to students at Stan State; / of meeting and developing strong relationships with important members of our local and regional community and alumni, / and most importantly, of preparing the foundation for the future of our University.

So let’s consider those months as the prologue to a book all of us are writing together — filled with the stories about the bright future of our University. The inauguration put the final few paragraphs on the foreword of that book, and with our strategic plan now in place, we can start writing the chapters.

But, as every writer knows, the most difficult words to write often are the first ones. So, where do we begin telling our stories? Let’s start by taking a look at the essence of who we are at Stan State, which provides us with a very important first word: engaging.

Engaging is the first word of our motto for a reason — it encompasses everything we do, every facet of our purpose for being here and every way we interact with our community and our region.

These Spheres of Engagement show how it is possible to see engagement throughout the entire University community.

Let’s start with one of our inherent strengths — how our faculty and staff engages with students. We consistently hear from our alumni that what made the biggest difference in their education at Stan State was the way our faculty and staff are willing to develop mentoring relationships with our students — guiding, motivating and encouraging them through their course of study, and often well beyond graduation day.

Dr. Russell Quaglia, founder of the Institute for Student Voice and Aspirations, said, “The students who are most engaged are the ones who [believe] they matter to the teacher.”

Indeed, our strong student-to-faculty ratio of 22:1, one of the best in the CSU system, certainly fosters these relationships, but that’s only a start. Our faculty members consistently demonstrate willingness to engage with students, through open-door policies with generous office hours, as well as through our more-direct approach with our popular Faculty Mentor Program.

When students bond with faculty, they also engage and connect with the University, which takes us to the second sphere. There are multiple studies indicating that the more students find a sense of belonging and meaningful social interaction on campus, the more successful they will be.

We have redoubled our efforts to make students feel welcome at Stan State from the moment they first step on campus through our Freshman Convocation and freshman and transfer orientation sessions.

One of our follow-throughs to make certain every one of our students feels safe and embraced can be found in our recent dedication of our new Diversity Center — a space dedicated to unity, diversity, peace, multi-culturalism and committed to the principle of inclusion. A national search to hire a full-time coordinator for the Diversity Center is under way. I believe the Center will develop into a very important campus space — one that will provide inclusive programming and activities for all students while they’re at Stan State.

All of this relates to building a strong foundation for student success. In fact, 2017 was a year of notable milestones for our University. In June, we graduated a record number, with 3,022 students receiving degrees or credentials. And this past fall, we admitted a record freshman class of 1,438 students, moving our enrollment to another first for the campus — we enrolled more than 10,000 students for the first time in our campus’ history!

Our commitment to making it possible for students to graduate in four years has redoubled with the launch of what we are calling My Academic Pathway, which includes three online tools to help students schedule and track their courses: STAN Planner, STAN Degree Progress and STAN Scheduler. Think about this, when a high school student selects courses, they might need to choose from among a dozen or so offerings. But for students entering college, remember that here at Stan State, we offer more than 2,000 courses each semester! So navigating the catalog while remaining on target to graduate on time can be a daunting and sometimes confusing challenge. Therefore, our online My Academic Pathway is designed to help guide our students through that process.

In addition, intensive advising, intersession fee waivers and other measures enabled by Graduation Initiative 2025 resulted in Stan State making significant strides toward meeting the CSU’s graduation rate benchmarks, such as our 4-year graduation rate. In its first year, advisers identified 301 on-the-cusp students—or students who needed just one (or two) courses in order to complete their degree. Our advisors were able to help 161 students enroll in their last remaining courses to help them graduate by summer 2017, thereby increasing our four-year graduation rate for first-time freshman by 4.3%.

And besides providing support to complete their courses, it is also critical to provide students with information, resources and support for their future jobs and careers. So, we have reinstituted and relaunched of our Career and Professional Development Center.

Another critical facet of our student success effort is the creation of a new campus division — the Strategic Planning, Enrollment Management and Innovation (SPEMI) Division. In today’s fast-paced world, SPEMI is positively impacting how we use data to inform our enrollment projections, student success predictive modeling and budgeting tools.

Moving to the next sphere of engagement, since we know that the vast majority of our more than 55,000 graduates have remained in Stan State’s primary six-county area, we can conclude that the success of our students translates directly into the ability of Stan State to engage with our community and our region.

One of the most obvious manifestations of our alumni’s impact on the region is in the number of teachers we prepare to step into K-12 classrooms. You’d be hard-pressed to go to any school within 50 miles of our campus and not discover that more teachers at that school attended Stan State than any other university. Similarly, you’ll find Stan State grads in the higher management levels of nearly every major corporation in our region, such as Foster Farms, E. & J. Gallo Winery, Hilmar Cheese, our numerous regional medical centers and many others.

But there are many other ways the University is directly reaching out to either provide or foster educational programs at the K-12 level that we believe will result in our region’s high schools graduating a higher percentage of students who are college-ready. And we’re doing everything possible to provide opportunities for these students. In addition to the record number of freshmen we received last fall, we were able to boost enrollment at our Stockton Center by 18% last year, and we are committed to supporting that rate of growth to better serve the public higher education needs of Stockton and San Joaquin County.

The more Stan State graduates we have settling within an hour of our campus, the more the region will identify Stan State as not only the leader in higher education, but as the region’s University of choice, and as such will be more willing to engage with and support Stan State — as we see in our fourth sphere of engagement. This is a step beyond building Warrior Pride in our students and alumni, it’s building an identity with those who live in the community we serve.

Earlier this month, we announced the news that the estate of a long-time Hilmar family, Helen and Louis Yecny, bequeathed $2.37 million dollars to Stan State in the largest gift from an individual in the University’s history. Their gift will benefit scholarships in the University Honors Program. While neither of them attended Stan State, by simply living in the community we serve, they recognized the positive impact our University has made and continues to make on our region.

Last year, the University also received a $1 million pledge from John and June Rogers toward the Mary Stuart Rogers Scholarship endowment, which provides scholarships to outstanding upper-class students and teaching credential candidates at Stan State. Please join me in thanking these generous and visionary donors for their commitment to educating our students.

As president, it is especially gratifying for me to see that this kind of community support has resulted in Stan State moving up from 23rd, or last, in the CSU system in private fundraising, to 19th, and we continue to grow in that area. In addition, we continue to seek out opportunities to partner with the region’s business leaders to discover the specific skills they are going to need as they build their workforces so we as a University can sculpt our curriculum and send work-ready graduates directly into high-demand jobs.

This brings us to our fifth sphere of engagement, because the more our region supports and identifies with the University, the easier it is for our employees to find their own sense of belonging, living and working here. So, to start, I would ask the staff members in the audience to stand and be recognized. Thank you for your dedication.

As a campus community, we can apply these five spheres of engagement to inform and inspire the five chapters of our book and bring to life the goals of our University Strategic Plan’s narrative: [A Sense of Place, Inclusion, Transformation, and Future](https://www.csustan.edu/strategic-planning). The University Strategic Plan builds on our current accomplishments and is designed to address and define student success at Stan State. The five overarching goals of our Strategic Plan are based on themes rather than University divisions, which is a deliberate effort to convey that this is a collective and collaborative University-wide effort.

The first goal ⎯ the first chapter in our book ⎯ is: Be a student-ready university

At the core of this statement is student success. Students are our No. 1 Priority. Our success as a University is defined by the success of our students.

A crucial element in ensuring student success is to know who our students are. Stanislaus State serves the highest percentage of first-generation college students than any other CSU campus. 74 percent of our students are the first in their family to pursue a college degree.

Our students are the “First in College and Next to Lead.” We are so proud of our students. They are Valley Tough, brave, pioneering, courageous and “have a dream” to go college. But they are dreaming not just for a job, but for deeper personal success and a professional career that is fulfilling and often gives back to their communities. They are implicitly becoming leaders and transforming themselves and their communities. They have grit, tenacity and tremendous potential.

Many of our faculty, staff and administrators also are the first in their families to have earned a college degree ⎯ they have walked in these students’ shoes and our institution is going to do great things to ensure they can achieve their hopes and realize their dreams.

Student access is a statewide issue. Thus, the reason for the CSU system Graduation Initiative 2025. In California, 32 percent of the population has attained a four-year degree or higher compared to the national average of 30 percent. In San Joaquin County, only 18 percent of the population holds a bachelor’s degree or higher. In Stanislaus County, that rate is 16 percent, which underscores the vital mission of Stan State to improve educational opportunities within the region we serve. The percentage of college graduates in our region must increase if it is to continue to grow as an important center of economic, cultural and intellectual growth and prosperity in California.

As I mentioned before, many efforts to support students and improve graduation rates have already started, and many will soon begin. Because we know that college is more than a collection of 120 units, or roughly 40 courses, and more than just passing those courses to get a degree. We OWE it to our students to help them navigate these complex course mazes.

Knowing that they are first-gen and dreaming of a meaningful career, we should also set up intentional programs to help them explore future careers, and offer more High Impact Practices, such as internships, fieldwork, and service learning, which will help them accrue valuable work experiences while still in college and connect their majors to real jobs and careers. We also need to help them find ways to communicate to their parents the value of college — both in terms of the life of the mind and in terms of designing and achieving their dream career.

To help facilitate this, we launched the ELEVATE student learning community ⎯ a collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. The goal of ELEVATE is to ensure that first-time, first-year housing students who took Early Start courses would be able to successfully complete their foundational coursework in English and math. At the same time, the goal of ELEVATE is for these students to learn the academic, personal and social skills necessary to integrate and persist in college.

At the conclusion of their first semester in college, 16 percent of ELEVATE students earned between a 3.5 and 4.0 GPA compared to 11 percent of non-ELEVATE housing students and 8 percent of non-housing students.

So, when it comes to learning in the classroom our talented and dedicated faculty are critical in promoting the academic success of our students. Our data shows Stan State students are doing well. Thank you, faculty, for your tremendous guidance, support and tireless effort in helping our students achieve academic success. Would all of our faculty members here today please stand and be recognized.

The second goal of the plan is: Facilitate transformational learning experiences driven by faculty success

The best teachers, this goal affirms, are life-learners, and the best education environments nurture faculty as well as student exploration and collaboration. In its strategies, it strives to better align spending and personnel decisions with University priorities of scholarship, diversity and equity. Last year, technology upgrades were completed in 13 classrooms, including our first Active Learning Classroom, with more upgrades planned for the coming year. In Fall 2017, 19 Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity awards were made to faculty totaling more than $100,000.

One of our RSCA awards went to Dr. Wing To, to conduct research on Dark Matter. The experiment he’s leading, the Large Underground Xenon Zeplin, aims to detect dark matter on Earth and measure its properties. This project will allow Dr. To and his students to become experts in experimental data analysis.

Another example of how we will be providing access to transformational learning experiences is through the work of Dr. Ellen Bell. As co-director of the University Honors Program, Dr. Bell led a team to bring the McNair Scholars Program back to campus through a $1.16 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The primary objective of this program is to place more first-generation, low-income and historically underrepresented students in master’s and Ph.D. programs.

Supporting faculty as scholars and teachers provides them with a foundation to engage students in research, internship, mentorship and the development of innovative programs, ultimately reinvesting in student success.

Goal #3 is to boldly pursue innovation and creativity.

This goal envisions innovation by creating inter-disciplinary degrees focused on solving regional problems and allows students to have more flexible scheduling options such as hybrid courses and high-quality, rigorous and engaging online baccalaureate and graduate programs.

This spring, we will pilot a program we are calling the Design Your Tomorrow Initiative for 30 junior and senior students. This is a new effort by Academic Affairs, Extended Education, and the Career and Professional Development Center in Student Affairs.

I’m proud to share that Stan State was one of only two CSUs selected to participate in Stanford’s Life Design Institute workshop this past summer. I thank Dr. Harold Stanislaw and Dr. Bruce Hesse for attending the summer boot camp.

Design Thinking consists of five steps:

1. Empathize with a user;
2. Define a problem;
3. Ideate or brainstorm;
4. Prototype solutions;
5. Test them.

Using this process to think about one’s future career helps address students’ anxiety about life after college and lets them thoroughly examine the different possibilities in front of them.

The Designing Your Tomorrow continuing education course will start in March. If you are interested in learning more and would like the opportunity to participate, feel free to stop by the interactive workshop tomorrow, January 24th, and meet other faculty members involved, or contact Julie Sedlemeyer, director of the Career and Professional Development Center.

Furthermore, I believe that everyone on campus has an innovative spirit and a strong drive to make a difference. Therefore, we have launched the IDEAS grant program — which stands for Innovate, Design, Excel & Assess for Success — to provide small grants to support and recognize your IDEAS to make Stan State an outstanding University. You may recall seeing an email about this. The deadline to submit IDEAS proposals is coming up Monday, February 12th — so be sure to submit your idea! Check your email for more information.

The fourth goal is to hone administrative efficacy through thoughtful stewardship of resources.

This goal is about taking a broad look at the University to identify all the different ways we can make changes, improve processes and invest dollars in a way that is thoughtful, and supports our underlying purpose of supporting students.

CSU enrollment and student achievement have reached all-time highs as the system graduates an ever-greater number of students. This academic year, Stan State enrolled 7.6 percent over our target FTEs. This indicates our programs are in high demand; students are choosing to attend Stan State and taking more courses per semester to speed toward a degree. Current projections indicate we may very well exceed targets for 2018-19.

Unfortunately, State budget projections are not as rosy as we had hoped for. Insufficient State funding will impact our ability to provide quality education and support services for the students already enrolled for fall 2018. Regrettably, because of this, the campus has decided to close enrollment for spring 2019. Our goal is to continue to provide student access and degree attainment within our budget constraints.

Goal 5 is to forge and strengthen bonds with our communities, rooted in a shared future.

Great universities are built by great communities. Stan State is one University with two locations poised to meet the needs of our diverse communities, both rural and urban. We provide access without shying away from high-quality academics and excellence. The communities we serve are looking to us to educate tomorrow’s teachers, business leaders, artists and those providing healthcare and social services to continue to build the prosperity and economic potential for our entire region.

This is just the beginning of the story we are writing. Numbers, plans and programs do not bring transformation, people do. It is up to us … Each one of us … collectively … collaboratively … collegially … to catapult Stan State to the next level.

Thank you to everyone, faculty, staff, students and community, for all you have done to move the needle. I would like to especially thank the members of the University Strategic Planning Council who have guided us in defining the chapters of our story.

No matter what your role is, or your office, the work you do here at Stan State is essential to helping us realize our goals.

It’s a new year, a new day on campus, please engage, join us in writing our story as we continue to build the future of Stan State, the future of our students, and our region.

Thank you again for attending my Spring Welcome Address. We are getting off to a great new year. Have a wonderful semester as we welcome back our students this week! Go Warriors!