

State of University Address: Thursday 26th January, 2019: Dublin Campus, Middle Georgia State University

President Christopher Blake

Faculty, Staff, Students, Trustees, Alumni & Friends of Middle Georgia State University:

Good afternoon. I am Christopher Blake and it is my honor to serve as the president of Middle Georgia State University. I thank you for joining me this afternoon at our annual State of the University Address. Welcome to those here in person on our Dublin campus and to those online at our other campuses and indeed anywhere else. I am very pleased to be in Laurens County today, and I thank our community partners for their support of the University. Our vision is to be an enthusiastic partner with our regional communities, and indeed today I had the pleasure of meeting with several community leaders. Their enthusiasm for the University was palpable. I am glad that we host in this room the Dublin-Laurens Chamber of Commerce for their monthly breakfast meetings, and we have now established a Middle Georgia State-Dublin Action Group to explore future new programs and initiatives. We are seeing in Dublin increased numbers of Dual Enrollment students at one end of the age range, and Adult Students at the other. Programs in Nursing, Business and Education are being planned for expansion here in Dublin, and I commit to the University exploring other ways in which we can grow our service of higher education to the people of Dublin-Laurens County. So thank you for being such great community partners!

I have an opportunity twice a year to address the whole University community, each year at Convocation in August and then in the winter State of the University address. I am glad today to present that Address and to give a progress report on our performance and to outline our future opportunities and priorities.

So let me start by saying loudly, clearly and unequivocally that the State of Middle Georgia State University is the healthiest and strongest it has been since our consolidation six years ago! Through the efforts of our faculty and staff since consolidation we are now enrolling and graduating

extraordinary numbers of students at Middle Georgia State. Indeed, in this current academic year we will have graduated nearly 1300 students, our second highest number since consolidation. And now our students can leave us with a cadre of qualifications from Certificates, Associates, Bachelor's and Master's degrees, contributing to the vibrancy of our region. 88% of our graduates reside within 75 miles of our Warner Robins campus, shaping the future of Georgia and giving back in so many personal and professional ways, and this University now delivers a regional economic impact of one quarter of \$1B annually. Our graduates are truly ambassadors of MGA. I applaud our faculty and staff for having prepared them so well for the greatness they demonstrate in their lives and careers here in Georgia.

That record number of graduates is no accident. It is the result of what I called for one year ago at my last State of the University address, when I chose the word "Intentionality" as the label we must put on our work. Thank you for turning that word into actions! Examples abound but I wish to highlight some here. Firstly, we are intentional about our Strategy, launching a new Strategic Plan titled "Elevating Middle Georgia" last August. What a great plan that is! It calls for purposeful enrollment, clear student success and the sharing of a built culture. Each day that plan lives and breathes in our work. For example, I am delighted to report that all of this year's initiatives from the plan are moving ahead aggressively. In addition to our academic growth, we have record numbers of students engaged in experiential learning credentials, and in undergraduate research. Currently nearly 700 students are actively pursuing research opportunities with faculty mentors. I could go on at length about the success of our "Elevating Middle Georgia" plan.

Secondly, it is clear that we are graduating more students because we are enrolling more students. Last year I called for the establishment of an Enrollment Management Division, to maintain the early fruits of enrollment growth and a revival that we saw sprouting forth. That nurturing is working. This week we maintained a third consecutive semester of enrollment growth on the previous year's enrollment. Three is not a blip, it is a trend! We have this spring over 7165 students enrolled at MGA. We exceeded our target, and still have Second Session in front of us. And this spring success was built on the back of our amazing results in the fall, where our headcount and credit hour production exceeded a 6% point growth on fall of 2017. What an amazing result, the best in the entire University

System of Georgia bar one. I congratulate every one of us because we collectively and individually have owned and acted upon the importance of enrollment, and in so doing have lived out that goal of shared culture. Now we must put our shoulder to the wheel for 2019 summer and fall semesters and exceed our target of a headcount of 8,150 students this coming fall. That is the imperative to which we commit.

The new level of collaboration and partnership between our Academic and our Enrollment operations is a game changer for this University. Until now candidly the left and right hands of student success have not always known what the other has been doing. Now the left and right hands of Academics and Enrollment Management are embraced and working together. Our Provost and Vice President for Enrollment Management now co-lead a Taskforce that is the gathering place across campuses and operations for data, planning and decisions about enrollment, and their work is leading to a new renaissance in student enrollment and success. But please, know that the task is not accomplished and the challenge continues. We must maintain this momentum, just as the USG is calling on all its institutions to implement a Momentum Year to improve retention and progression. For truthfully, if our students enroll but do not graduate in a timely fashion, or if they leave to pursue studies elsewhere, we have not succeeded. Our Momentum Year, to use the USG's expression, requires us to deliver a coordinated plan for student success from the moment of their application to MGA to the moment they apply for graduation. It is our responsibility, not only theirs, to support that progression. I congratulate our faculty and staff for the many new initiatives that will deliver on this Momentum expectation. We have in this year created new advising systems, broadened our orientation program, created Open Houses, expanded our degree programming in health sciences, partnered with the military in cyber security programming, strengthened the hiring and role of our Academic Deans. My charge to the Enrollment Taskforce is clear. We must now increase enrollment for the five-year duration of the "Elevating Middle Georgia" Plan. We must do this through pathways of degree success from recruitment through to graduation. And we must coordinate this efficiently and effectively across all five campuses. MGA's campuses are akin to a convoy of ships. We proceed together or we do not proceed at all. Now we also have stronger data and dashboards for monitoring that progress, thanks to the leadership of the Office of Institutional Research. Provost Anderson, Vice-President Stenander

and your teams, thank you for what you are doing to make this happen! Please now proceed urgently to do this for summer and fall semesters and meet our challenging targets. To support your efforts I announce here I shall meet monthly with you and members of the Taskforce to support our efforts and actions.

This brings us to another USG major initiative that is shaping our work. Next month under the leadership of the Executive Director of Human Resources, we shall finalize our MGA plan for the USG's Comprehensive Administrative Review. Vicky Smith and her Working Group are bringing forward recommendations on how to improve administrative efficiency and effectiveness, on the basis of the data produced by the Huron surveys conducted in the fall. I thank the 100 people who participated in those surveys and our CAR Working Group for its vital work. This is not the occasion to anticipate those recommendations, indeed recognizing that already we are accomplishing a great deal by operating across five campuses with limited staffing and resources. But that accomplishment can always be improved and we stand resolutely behind Chancellor Wrigley's goal of greater administrative efficiency and effectiveness across the System, a University System that is a \$9B commitment from the people of Georgia to university education. We can and will do our part. Campus coordination has already been a focus of academic and administrative efforts these past years, and particularly in the last year as we move forward with a clearer but unfinished academic strategy. Now we look forward to the results of our CAR study to see how we can do this even more effectively in the year ahead.

Part of the challenge of MGA's situation is very familiar. We operate our State University at a cost to our students that is virtually identical to that of a State College. That is a wonderful thing for our students! Our affordability is a reason for us to celebrate, not to commiserate. But it does mean that our pockets are not deep, as you know. It means that our sister State Universities have more flexibility with budgets, and often more employees per student FTE. Please be aware I am fully conscious of the pressure that our more limited budget places on us and am truly impressed how our faculty and staff make every dollar stretch a little further. That is why our additional resources are so important, and I am glad we continue to attract supporters who give of their own dollars. Our Annual Fund exceeded its 2018 target of \$875K this year, and our faculty and staff still continue to participate at very high

levels. Simply, I thank and applaud you for doing so. Participation, not the dollar amount, is the key here and I ask you to ensure in 2019 that you be a donor in our Faculty and Staff campaign, no matter how small your gift. As well as a strong year for the Annual Fund, we made great progress in our Greatness Campaign, securing our largest gift in our history from the Peyton Anderson Foundation last June for the Enrollment Center that will be built on our Macon campus. Now we must continue to bring other large gifts and today I task our Development Staff with bringing our Greatness Campaign to a powerful close in the next two years with historic levels of donor funds. We can do that, and in so doing build academic quality and vitality that delivers on the promise of a true University education for our students.

I believe this is very possible. Our reputation is larger and stronger today than in the six years since consolidation in large part due to the greater brand recognition and stronger communications we have effectively messaged across the region. We have gained consistent support from the Georgia General Assembly, with budget proposals on the floor for \$5M for new aviation equipment, and \$11M for renovations of the Roberts Library and Dillard Hall in Cochran. Both are essential to resource our regional impact. Our plans to expand Aviation to greater Atlanta will only strengthen our presence in Eastman, so we are truly living out the reality that regional strength is the foundation to local strength. Dean Adon Clark and Chief of Staff Ember Bentley are diligently pursuing with our legislators and community partners the possibility of a greater Atlanta presence for our Aviation program, and they are building a coalition of partners at the state and community levels for that to happen. That is a reflection of the quality of our Aviation programming, recognized by Delta Airlines in our partnership in its Propel Program for pilot employment, only one of 8 schools of aviation nationally that are currently members of the program.

This excellence and emergence of University behavior is manifest across our campuses. I believe it is the result of team work and honest, tough conversations. I believe we realize at a heightened level that our individual success is only possible if it is a shared and collective success. I believe we are now looking to improve our work and to improve this University through our work. In recognition of this change – hard change but real progress – I am proud that we were able this past year to award merit

increases to the salaries of our faculty and staff. In a year where there was no State funding for employee raises, we proceeded with awarding merit increases at MGA, quite simply because our faculty and staff have earned them. Only ten USG institutions gave increases, and 16 chose not to. I am pleased we belonged to the group that chose to award them. Thank you for the hard work across our campuses. These salary increases are a small recognition of the efforts and effectiveness of our great faculty and staff.

The real measure of our work, though, is in the lives we educate. Every day, especially on the stressful days, I urge you to look around at the students on our campuses. They are amazing people and they inspire us. They put their trust in us. They come to our classes with us. They balance their degree demands with many other necessities and commitments. They are not wealthy elites. They are building greatness in their lives and in our University. They are indeed amazing people. You only have to talk for two minutes with our SGA president, Nemiah Plant, and her student co-leaders to know that. You only have to have lunch with our BOLD Students – Brothers of Leadership and Distinction – to know how they will help create a better world. They have an understanding of their connectedness to our University and their communities, and so it was wonderful to see nearly 200 students, faculty and staff participate last fall in our first ever Institutional Day of Service. As our residence population increases with our larger number of enrolled students, we must enhance our communities of engagement for our students. For example, our residential Living Learning Communities provide a vital opportunity to align classroom learning with broader college and community development. We launched a Freshman Year Residential Experience in the fall, and I challenge our Student Affairs team to work with faculty in opening three more LLC's next fall, one more on each campus. This resurgence of student success is emblematic of achievement not only in the classroom, but across our campus life. Our student-athletes continue to excel academically and in terms of volunteerism, with record numbers being All Americans. Our Career Services programs continue to equip ever growing numbers of students with the tools of success in career interviewing and hiring, and Greek fraternity chapters are now growing and sororities being planned. These and other new initiatives are creating stronger experiences to enrich classroom learning and strengthen what it means to make MGA a residential home away from home. For residential living is indeed home to our students, now with 15.6% more

students residing this fall on one of our campuses than in the previous year. We must continue to develop and improve a mix of connecting and unifying experiences – including the growing population we serve via online learning - through which our students’ greatness is attainable and visible here at MGA.

The capacity for us to deliver more has occurred in 2018 and must be our future promise. And by way of example, when I use the term “capacity” I do literally mean that term, for this past year we were rewarded by the Board of Regents with approval for a new 309 bed residence facility by the Lake on our Macon campus. What a transformational opportunity this will be when in 2020 we open that facility and have over 700 students residing on our Macon campus. That is the result of a vision and a strategy which has led our external stakeholders to have confidence in our future. I congratulate our Residence Life and Facilities staff for navigating this outcome so effectively. As a public university we have to make similar cases to our external community. I am proud that one of our legislators in Atlanta said to me this December that MGA is one of the most visible and persuasive universities in the halls of the State Capitol. I thank Albert Abrams for helping establish that visible presence over the past few years, positioning us well to continue seeking funding from the Legislature during this 2019 Assembly for our Eastman and Cochran campus needs. In the same way that we must seek philanthropic partners, so we must also develop legislative support that can drive funds to MGA. We are doing so now in a way that lives up to our University identity and mission. As 2018 ended we learned that Macon-Bibb Council voted to fund a new entrance and perimeter road for our Macon campus, providing the infrastructure to support increased residency, safer traffic flow and improved access to the future privately-funded Enrollment Center. This kind of successful partnership with private and public agencies is essential to maintain our fiscal sustainability. This past year we have demonstrated that capacity and have achieved results at new levels of success.

One year ago I used in my State of the University Address an analogy of us growing up. I compared us to a child who had reached the age of five years and was about to embark on a life-enhancing transition to grade school. One year later I am proud to share our First Grade report and can celebrate with you that we have indeed learned well and we are succeeding in this new and challenging place

called school. People of MGA, we have gained a Grade A!! Allow me to indulge that school metaphor again in this Address. Now we need to progress seamlessly to the next grade. Until now our history as Middle Georgia State appears to have yielded one “Big New Idea” each year: consolidation in year one, graduate degrees in year two, University status in year three, Aviation expansion in year four, and new leadership excellence across campus and schools and divisions in year five. So what of this coming year? This year’s “Big New Idea” is different from the others. Now we must build upon our progress as charted and directed by our “Elevating Middle Georgia” plan. That will equate metaphorically to us moving up one grade level incrementally and then excelling at that level, doing this systematically year by year. We expect children to thrive at school by learning more, performing better and showing greater understanding and skills each year and in each grade. That is precisely the challenge – the big new idea, if you wish - before us now. We must keep going in the same direction and with the same outlook that we have demonstrated well this past year. We must do this just as hard, just as enthusiastically, just as energetically, just as diligently and just as collaboratively as we can. We cannot afford to slow down, ease up, or think the job done. Indeed, the job has barely begun. Children experience about six years of what we know as grade school. We need to do similar as we move ahead with our “Elevating Middle Georgia” plan in order truly to build our strength and regional presence as the state university of Middle Georgia. Going forward this way is not a small or an ordinary or an unchallenging or an unexciting thing. It is the exact opposite. It is hard, fun, challenging, essential, risky and transformational if we are to grow and if we are to embody the very greatness that we claim our students can find at MGA. The great German poet, Johann Goethe, once wrote: “Dream no small dreams, for they have no power to move the hearts of men and women”. We always ask children whom do they dream to be when they grow up. It is in fact a great question to keep asking throughout our lives. And we give children a plan to achieve their dreams and that plan is known as education. At Middle Georgia State University we have already found our dream, in our vision of “transforming individuals and their communities through extraordinary higher learning”. That vision is indeed no small dream. And now we have the map and the means for realizing that dream, through a plan that shows us the way forward for the next few years. Let us continue resolutely along that road and turn our University dream into a powerful reality for the benefit of the people of middle Georgia. Thank you. I wish you a wonderful 2019.