

A DECADE OF PROMISE

Good afternoon and welcome to the 2020 State of the University address. This is the seventh such address I have been privileged to deliver to the faculty and staff of Middle Georgia State since arriving as your colleague and president in late 2013. I am grateful that you join me today as we meet again at the start of another calendar year, mid-way through our academic year.

Today, however, is interesting because we stand not only at the start of a new year, but also at the start of a new decade: the 2020s. The astronomer Carl Sagan once noted, “The lifetime of a human being is measured by decades”. I believe he was right: that a decade allows us to take stock of our life and our work over a significant period and to better understand the journey we are pursuing. The same is true of an organization of human beings, such as a University. Our life as a University has meaning and significance over a decade, and today in this Address I ask us to take that long-term view and long-term memory. Imagine the start of the 2030s, ten years from now. What kind of a University will we be able to deliver to those who will one day follow in our footsteps and “take up the torch” which is emblazoned on our University seal as a promise to future generations of students? While of course we cannot gaze into a crystal ball and predict the future, we can be confident that we are on a clear pathway forward and that we have a map to guide our steps. That is the purpose of our “Elevating Middle Georgia” Strategic Plan, which charts our journey in this new decade and for the next four years. In so doing, there are some clear commitments

we must fulfill as we build this University to new levels of excellence over the next ten years, centered upon our three primary tasks of growing enrollment purposefully, owning student success and building shared culture across our campuses and communities.

I believe strongly that we are doing these well already and shall continue to do so in the coming decade. Part of my confidence in that claim comes from the fact that we have a track record to prove it. I invite you to think back to the start of the 2010s, just ten years ago. Many of you were here and can remember that, at that time, we were two colleges with different missions, different directions, different employees, and different students. In ten short years we have truly transformed ourselves, our institutions and our united mission for the people of middle Georgia. It has been a roller-coaster ride – with both stunning highs and dizzying lows - and yet we can congratulate ourselves on the journey we have made in the past decade. It has been an amazing one of renewal, growth and change. Going forward, I believe the pace of change at Middle Georgia State University will be different, but the scale of the changes and the opportunity to serve will increase even more. We have reached a new level of identity, and the potential for us in the 2020s is extraordinary and truly exciting. We could not have imagined this ten years ago. Today we have been given a new challenge that is truly awe-inspiring, and we will rise to meet it.

The signs are already there that we are up to this task. When we look at our trajectory in recent years that is clear. We have remained in the top flight of enrollment

successes in the University System for the past four semesters, as one of the top three performers. That is a living daily example of purposeful enrollment, and today we are proud say that the first semester of the new decade is showing a near 5% increase over last year, with over 7,500 students enrolled at the University. Looking back ten years we could not have imagined we would have over 300 graduate students, and would be preparing to offer a new Doctoral degree in Information Technology. Our profiles in the fields of health, aviation, education, music and others have risen to new levels of prominence, and position us for continued growth of our University's reputation in our state, nation and even our world. I congratulate the faculty and academic administrators whose vision and determination have put us there.

I also want to thank my President's Advisory Board, a group of talented and dedicated leaders and executives who serve a wide range of industry, government, and educational organizations. This body is helping to inform us of workforce and community needs, and to keep us current on trends in our region.

This morning we came together on our Macon campus to celebrate a new beginning for our programming and capacity to sustain that purposeful enrollment growth, which is at the heart of our Strategic Plan. We did this with the groundbreaking of the new Peyton Anderson Enrollment Center, and I thank all of you who attended and celebrated this milestone. This new Enrollment Center, planned for opening in the summer of 2021, is so much more than a building. It will be a place of human

engagement and a new home for bringing together the University and the people of middle Georgia. It will provide a new way and a new place for us to work in supporting the hopes of future students throughout this decade and beyond. And the Peyton Anderson Enrollment Center is literally and figuratively an example of people coming together. How did we do this? We did it through belief in the future of this University. Testament to that belief is that the Peyton Anderson Enrollment Center has been funded entirely - every single dollar - from private gifts given specifically for the Center. What amazing confidence that shows! Furthermore, our donors, the Peyton Anderson Foundation, Macon-Bibb City and Commission, the Georgia Department of Transportation, and the University itself have all come together on this project to provide a new doorway to the University. We have built a coalition of support and worked together to realize this dream. This will be a living example of the kind of work before us this decade, and the Center will be a permanent visible message and symbol of our new level of commitment to future students. For years we have hoped for this new face to the University. We now have it underway, and I thank our community partners, our donors, and the Foundation Board of Trustees for this extraordinary example of our University elevating middle Georgia.

Our commitments to student success and to first-rate learning environments indeed are visible across all our campuses at Middle Georgia State University. For example, here in Cochran we are in the advanced stages of needed renovations to the Roberts Memorial Library and to the Science and Nursing facilities in Dillard Hall. These renovations are the first in decades and will make us more ready for the challenges of

tomorrow. Campus transformations continue across all our University, as in the construction of the new Lakeview Pointe Residential Hall in Macon, building our hybrid identity of an access institution with a blended function, providing both traditional and non-traditional learning experiences. Our Aviation School has been the beneficiary of a transformational gift of two aircraft from the Jones Family Foundation, allowing us to double the number of flight students at the Macon Downtown Airport. In Warner Robins we have opened the Center for Software Innovation in conjunction with Robins Air Force Base just last month, and we have equipped a new computer lab and expanded classrooms for our Nursing students in Dublin, in anticipation of growth there. I thank and applaud our faculty and staff whose work has made these innovations meaningful and necessary. We are becoming strong at doing “both-and-and”, showing the agility to support both traditional residential undergraduate education, and also building an online community of learners at both undergraduate and graduate levels through our MGA Direct program. In my 2020 Vision Paper from two years ago I called on us to do these things with a focus on intentionality and to be candid about the limitations facing us from resource scarcity and a lower tuition rate than the rest of the state university sector. That 2020 Vision Paper anticipated the very challenges we are facing in the State of Georgia in the current and in next year’s FY21 budget. Governor Brian Kemp has called for cuts and the downsizing of state budgets, so the challenge of adapting to changing economic reality is something we must embrace. The great faculty and staff here at MGA have already done that with skill and goodwill, and I thank you for doing this so ably. Your agility, nimbleness and adaptability are essential to our success, and epitomize daily our institutional core

value of Adaptability. I honor you for this accomplishment. I believe that continuing this as we go forward in this decade will not mean the end of innovation or growth or strength, but will in fact permit us to think creatively about how to be our very best and impactful as an academic community. That impact is realized primarily and ultimately in the lives of the students we serve. They are the ambassadors of the University in the community at large, and our 40,000 alumni have transformed this state and this nation in unimaginably good ways. It is fitting that next Thursday we launch our first-ever Center for Career Development & Leadership, designed to harness that track record of student success for the decade ahead through the coming generation of alumni. I congratulate our Student Affairs and Academic Affairs staff on this collaboration, and wish you much success.

This new Center also provides us with a tangible example of something that as your president I recognize only too well, namely that we are asked to do much with limited resources, an experience we have known since our birth as a single, unified institution. I am working with my leadership team to secure a strong budget in FY21 from the University System of Georgia, and state appropriations to support student success for next year and beyond. This will build on the many millions of dollars in state appropriations obtained in recent years to support education to our students in this region. I can remind you that our most important assets are the people of this University community and the intellectual capital and innovation they bring to the challenges ahead. I mentioned our Strategic Plan earlier. It will not have been lost on many that one of the seven priorities for this year is to evaluate staff compensation

and strategy. I am pleased to tell you that we remain committed to this goal. In this semester we will contract with the Carl Vinson Institute, which will come on campus in the summer to begin the work of reviewing how we structure our staff career opportunities and reward them for their efforts and successes. Let me be clear. The purpose here is to enhance, reward and grow the opportunities for career development for our excellent staff. In about one year we will know the results of the Carl Vinson study, with a view to implementing compensation changes in the FY22 financial year. In the meantime, we continue to uphold the USG's efficiency and effectiveness drive through the CAR initiative, and will strive to maintain the standards needed to fulfill our mission and the commitment to offer competitive salaries for our faculty and staff. Again, at this University our people are our primary concern and asset. That must never be compromised or forgotten.

As a University, of course, we exist solely for our students. They are the reason we are here, and their success in a rapidly evolving global economy is what must define our priorities for this new decade. Our success as professional faculty and staff is defined ultimately by our students' success. Next month will be one of the highlights of my calendar, when I enjoy sharing a day with our Academic Recognition Scholar at the February Board of Regents meeting. One student scholar from each of the USG's 26 institutions is identified and honored by the Board, and hosted for a lunch with the Chairman of the Board, the Chancellor, the USG presidents and each scholar's family members. These students are the very best from across the System. This year Logan Gibbs was selected as our MGA student representative. Logan is graduating in the

spring with a degree in English, having already graduated with a degree in Psychology in 2018. She plans on pursuing graduate degrees and becoming an educator in high school or college. Logan was a former competitive athlete in our women's varsity soccer program, traveling extensively with her team for competitions, and she has worked with Dr. Lorraine Dubuisson on leading a 9th grade Knights Writers Camp. Logan is just one example of what is actually very common at MGA, namely thousands of extraordinary students, who rise to high levels of excellence while facing real life challenges and demands. In fact, the only difficulty with Logan's selection was that so many other equally qualified student candidates were eligible and submitted for nomination! As I travel the state of Georgia and meet our alumni and their employers, the overwhelmingly consistent message is how far above the norm are the values and skills of our graduates. Yes, we must congratulate our graduates on this reputation that they have each earned and will continue to earn, and yet still recognize that our vision, our strategy and our efforts as professionals are absolutely critical to their success and their building of the Georgia of the 2020s.

This connectivity, captured in our university core value of Engagement, reminds us that none of these achievements in the past, nor any of the tasks facing us in this decade, can be accomplished in isolation or in silos. We can only continue this trajectory of success if we honestly communicate, listen and dialogue as a community of scholars and learners. To that end, I encourage each of you to keep me informed of your experiences and to offer me suggestions as vital professional faculty and staff at MGA. My presidency is only valuable to this University if my office and my work

operates in conjunction with yours and your goals. To that end I encourage you to visit with me, or email me, or to put suggestions in the Greatness Dropbox on the Office of President webpage. I have asked my staff to promote that Dropbox tool actively. You have my assurance that I shall consider any of your comments and will share those with relevant colleagues who have an investment in your feedback and recommendations. Since we are spread over many miles and campuses, please feel free to use these tools and ways to reach out to me.

Last summer I attended a national conference, at which an esteemed academic scholar presented research on college presidencies and the perspective of those presidents in America today. The research was strong and his presentation was compelling, but I spoke up at the end since I profoundly disagreed with his conclusion. For this scholar had summarized the situation as one where college presidents were increasingly anxious about the future of higher education, and that the disruption we see around us is weakening the chances and scope for higher education and its leadership. I would suggest we re-frame that reality. For today we stand at a new decade, forty years since the start of the digital revolution, and at the dawn of amazing advances in knowledge, in inter-disciplinary thinking, in the challenge of separating noise from voice, and at a pivotal time - the first time in eighty years since the Second World War, I would argue - that democracy is being disputed and re-appraised by its friends and its foes alike. What an amazing, challenging, relevant and thrilling time to be part of an institution which, by its very nature, has such immense value to offer both individuals and society as a whole. I encourage you to grasp this

moment and look forward hopefully, not anxiously, to the decade ahead. It is going to be thrilling. It is going to be complex. And it is going to mean that you and I will have work that in ways that are truly going to shape the future ahead. That is a noble calling and a professional opportunity like no other. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt once noted: "It's fun to be in the same decade with you". Every day I am aware - and remind anyone who wants to listen - that we are blessed with a unique opportunity here at Middle Georgia State University, making history with a new and young University in a way that is not possible at most other organizations. The foundations we lay today will uphold this academic community for decades to come. Our decisions will truly impact that future. As we start the 2020s I can tell you, my esteemed colleagues, it really is fun to be in this decade with you and with each other. I, for one, look forward to a decade we are about to shape in so many wonderful ways as Middle Georgia State University.

Thank you.

Christopher Blake, Ph.D.

President, Middle Georgia State University