

THE 2021 STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT CHRISTOPHER BLAKE

Good afternoon. Fellow Knights and friends of Middle Georgia State University, I welcome you to the 2021 State of the University address. To each of our students, faculty, staff, trustees and alumni, I earnestly hope this New Year and spring semester have started well and in good health for you. This is the annual occasion, mid-way through the academic and fiscal year, when I present to you an update on our progress and vitality as a University. Today I do so from the Roberts Memorial Library on our Cochran campus, where this month we re-opened the Library after a multi-million dollar renovation project secured by bonded funds from the State of Georgia. Along with a similar renovation, for science and nursing, to Dillard Hall just next door, these buildings have been re-purposed for a new generation of faculty and students, and equipped with the space, technology, and tools that are necessary for a 21<sup>st</sup> century of learning. The last time these buildings were renovated was back in the middle of the previous century. So, it is tremendous to see them now boasting the new resources we have available to us for teaching and learning. The torch on our University seal is truly illuminating our studies and our work across the generations, and we stand ready to serve the people of middle Georgia for another generation to come. I thank Governor Kemp, the Georgia Legislature, the Board of Regents and Chancellor Wrigley for their support of our renovations and special appropriations. In the past seven years, MGA has secured over \$75M in public and private funds, and our stakeholders, friends, alumni and colleagues at the State level have supported our mission of higher learning for future generations. I thank and honor them for that support.

This year was to be one in which we built on that foundation and saw outstanding examples of success. Normally I use this occasion to highlight some of our many successes in the past year,

and I shall indeed come to those shortly, but first I must recognize that our work and accomplishments as a University during this past year have taken place within the context of some of the most challenging, frightening and unstable of environments in decades. The COVID-19 pandemic has reached into our University and communities and upended our work for nearly one year. All members of our MGA family have suffered disruption during the pandemic. Some 400 plus members of our University community have contracted the virus, and hundreds of others been required to quarantine. And tragically, a few members of our MGA family have lost loved ones to the ravages of COVID-19. Please join me in a moment of silence to remember those close to the MGA family who succumbed this past year, and to extend best wishes for those now battling the virus.

Thank you. Now despite the pain and disruption of this pandemic, I can report to you this afternoon that it is clear that our University is weathering the COVID-19 storm with resilience and determination. Nearly 8,000 students are currently studying at MGA, and our amazing faculty and staff have adapted their teaching and work to maintain business operations during this wretched pandemic. Indeed, Middle Georgia State University has survived the 10% cut in E&G budgets imposed across all Georgia state agencies this fiscal year while sustaining our students' learning and our employees' livelihoods. I thank our COVID-19 response team, led by Dean Tara Underwood and assisted so ably by many others across the University and our campuses, who help keep us safe and informed as we continue our work. Our core value of Adaptability continues to be practiced by our wonderful Facilities staff, who work tirelessly to enhance the safety of our campuses through additional sanitizing, installation of safety equipment, reconfiguration of classrooms into safer, socially-distanced learning spaces, and

countless other acts that slow the spread of COVID-19. Similarly, our faculty successfully transitioned all possible coursework to online models in just two weeks last March, when we closed our campuses. And, when we began our return last fall, we leveraged our strong base of online learning to offer our students a variety of course delivery options. To our staff, our gratitude and recognition is just as emphatic. Our staff developed entirely new and flexible ways to work, providing exceptional service to our community. To each of our faculty and staff, I thank you, I applaud your work and I urge you to maintain the same level of diligence and commitment you have already shown in health and safety precautions to continue meeting our mission in 2021. And to those at the core of what we do – our students – who faced a wholly-reinvented experience with grace, we applaud your adaptability and we commit to teaching you with continued dedication through this pandemic ordeal and beyond. COVID-19 will be with us for some time still. But we can and will prevail, and we will be a stronger University as a result of that experience.

Were a pandemic not bad enough, we are also weathering cultural and political strife in our nation, and, yes, in our state, at levels unknown in decades. Daily we see images, voices and opinions about events that appear to divide communities, sow distrust, scream anger, ignore evidence and endanger lives. Our Republic, founded on the principle of “Out of many, One”- most commonly rendered in its Latin form, “E Pluribus, Unum” - is being tested and riven with willful ignorance and deliberate animosity. This is not the first time our Republic has faced daunting challenges, but it is certain we are facing new tests right now. Yet, just last week, the hope of democracy and the promise of America was evident yet again, when at the same hallowed U.S. Capitol where a mob threatened our national order, instead people gathered to

welcome a new president. I urge us to heed the words of President Biden in his Inaugural address: “Without unity, there is no peace, only bitterness and fury.... This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge, and unity is the path forward. Hear one another, see one another, show respect to one another.”

Similarly, Governor Kemp noted two weeks ago in his State of the State address, the people of Georgia have risen admirably to these challenges of our times. Noting the health crisis caused by COVID-19 and the economic downturn in its wake, Governor Kemp reminded us that Georgians have built solid foundations literally in the soil of the State over the centuries, and our resilience will bear new harvests for the future. His focus on initiatives to strengthen rural Georgia spoke directly to our mission and opportunities as a University, raising our potential at MGA to partner in areas such as healthcare and education, which Governor Kemp has prioritized for this year’s General Assembly. Alongside other statewide priorities in technology, aviation, business and public life, MGA’s role in meeting these economic and community needs is surely that of a provider of experts and expertise. I am delighted that the Governor’s budget anticipates restoring to the USG the “enrollment formula” of funding that was suspended during the current fiscal year due to the pandemic, since that budget restoration will help resource our mission to meet these opportunities in Georgia. Indeed, this heralds the resumption of some normality for our financial planning and reality, and positions us well to be leaders in economic, professional and educational renewal in the region. Moreover, it means our students are being prepared for careers in Georgia that will support our state’s recovery from the pandemic. We shall be stronger as a result of this challenge, and our students even more ready and capable for the future challenges in their lives and work.

Indeed, our work is of such great importance in helping our students and our society navigate the future in a healthy, informed and democratic way. Knowledge is taught and learned to build the person, yes, and also to build the communities where individuals live and work. That calling could not be more urgent at this time. In an era of mistrust, misinformation and mischief, we need values-aware and educated citizens who use their knowledge for the common good. That calling is as noble a vocation as any can be, and I challenge us today to embrace with enthusiasm the role we can each play at MGA in fulfilling that calling.

As we step into the spring of 2021, and despite a fair amount of duress and stress, the University continues to thrive. So, what do I mean by thriving? Well firstly, our core mission of educating and graduating students was a huge success in a year of unparalleled difficulty. In 2020, MGA saw nearly 1,300 students walk a virtual Commencement stage and leave with a lifelong degree. Now at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and shortly at the doctoral level, we are equipping our graduates with the tools of knowledge to shape their careers and be leaders in the economic and cultural vitality of Georgia.

This impact on Georgia in terms of workforce development is increasingly being appreciated by our friends and stakeholders across the state. I mentioned earlier the funds obtained from outside, and key within those has been private philanthropic giving. Our Advancement office is about to launch the public phase of our Greatness Campaign for fund-raising that will close this year at nearly \$12M. Never before have we done this. Our appeal and value proposition are attracting investment at levels that can transform our students' experiences. An example of this is the Peyton Anderson Enrollment Center taking shape on our Macon campus, making steady progress since its groundbreaking, just hours before I delivered this address one year ago.

Today that Center is one of many symbols we have across our campuses of increasing strength, its outline and frame visible from I-475 – signaling for all to see that we are a University that has marched forward despite the headwinds of COVID-19. What are some of the other ways we have marched forward since I spoke to you last winter? Since last January we admitted the first class of Knights to experience life and learning at our new Lakeview Pointe residence hall. That home to our students has been enhanced, with support from Macon-Bibb government, by the addition of safer and more aesthetic roadways to our students’ residences and the Macon campus perimeter. We secured two additional aircraft at the Macon Downtown airport, thanks to the Jones Family Foundation, and extraordinary results from the 2020 General Assembly in funding an expansion of our Nursing program in Dublin, as well as increased capital investment in Aviation on our Eastman campus. And today, here in Cochran, we have around us similarly renewed facilities in the Roberts and Dillard buildings, embodying our dedication to teaching and learning.

But all of this capital investment is only important if it drives learning and propels our onward journey to teach and equip our students with career-building degrees. On that front I am proud of what our faculty and staff have accomplished since that groundbreaking and speech last year. This past year we continued to build our graduate experience and culture, and now have 5% of our student body – almost 400 students - studying one of our seven graduate degrees and certificates. This coming fall we shall augment this graduate culture, started just five years ago, with our first-ever doctoral degree, the Doctor of Science in Information Technology, which was the catalyst for our elevation in December to that of a Level V institution in the SACS-COC terminology, allowing us to continue developing other terminal degrees.

Our academic emergence as a state university now requires us to make the case for a similar level of funding as other state universities. We must always strive to be the most affordable state university in the state and region, but our goal must also be to seek to reduce the funding “gap” between MGA and other state universities in Georgia, precisely in order to maintain the extraordinary momentum we have demonstrated since consolidation nine years ago. Reducing that funding gap may take some time as well as effort, but as your president I assure you it is a goal I shall pursue for the benefits of our students and our community.

In this past year, countless accomplishments have occurred at the place we know and love as Middle Georgia State University. The true strength and promise of the University, however, lies in the people we serve – our students. It is they, and their careers and lives as alums, who tell the story of who we are. And when we hear that story, it is indeed an inspiring one. It is a story we can continue to shape, even with the headwinds of a pandemic and an economic downturn. I appreciate the confidence you have each shown daily in our University in your studies and your work, even as we faced dark and uncertain times this past year. As we returned this January to campus, we anticipated continued challenges as the pandemic increased within our communities and, yes, even on our campuses. But our experiences have made us stronger and ready to face this year’s harsh realities with confidence and resilience. As we anticipate the large-scale availability of vaccinations – and I urge you please to take the vaccine when you can – we must meantime continue every safety precaution to do our part to stop the spread of COVID-19. As vaccines become increasingly available, the hope we share for a life together, like the one we had before, is redoubled. We shall meet again in the not too distant future fully in person, to share our community and live out learning as a shared experience. We shall greet

one another in person in the hallways, cafeterias and residence halls and in many other campus spaces. Our faculty and students will be able to set aside laptops and connect again at renewed levels in classrooms and labs. We must have the confidence to expect to do that again. We have work to do and a ways still to go to recover that reality, but we shall work to that end. We will come back together and thrive in the energy of shared campus experiences. Knowing that, I am pleased and honored to tell you that the State of the University in 2021 is one of heroism, determination, and hope. Let that reality illuminate our path in the months ahead. Thank you. Be well, and GO KNIGHTS!

Christopher Blake, Ph.D.

President, Middle Georgia State University

Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2021