President’s back to campus comments August 2019

Welcome—I for one continue to be excited at the beginning of the fall semester—I still love school!! And some 50 years ago, On September 30, 1969, Clayton Junior College opened its doors to 942 students. Some 50 years later, we serve some 7000 students—true to our heritage, advance a mission that commits us to an environment of experience based learning, enriched by active community engagement, and committed to preparing increasing number of students from all walks of life to succeed in a diverse society. This institution has always brought with it the chance to learn things. There is always excitement with the arrival of new colleagues, whose entrance provides a chance for new opportunities for learning—both for us and for them. And there is excitement with a new set of students, who attempt to balance anxiety associated with a new environment with a confidence that they are bringing much to others in this environment.

These are not the easiest of times for higher education—we are challenged by changes in the external environment that simultaneously express belief in greater need for the learning provided here, and simultaneously express doubt that we can be successful in meeting those needs. And these are not the easiest of times to focus on our own core business of learning when the external environment is fraught with uncertainties about domestic and foreign policies, about issues of race and class and sex and orientation and income, and basic assumptions—both examined and unexamined—about ways in which we as citizens and human beings relate to one another. And yet in the face of these seemingly contradictory messages and significant challenges, this institution must continue to strive to support students and communities that can benefit from what we do and the environment which we can help create—seeking to balance the needs for change with the discovery of those elements of our work that must be preserved.

Our strategic plan has us focused on the core business of learning—and conversations overheard last week and here indicate a broad commitment to that core business—a commitment that always gives me cause for hope in pessimistic times. That plan emerged in part because of conversations years ago here by a few colleagues about creating Harvard on the South Side, and a general faculty and staff response through the planning process that we needed to achieve excellence in a very different way.

Our distinctive characteristics associated with the learning come from our opportunities to imbed learning in a community based environment, and to connect learning for students in our courses with outcomes that the students and we can describe as having value in the public, private and non-profit sectors. And we have done so with an eye toward affordability—in list of 100 public institutions with lowest in-state tuition rate and high proportion of funds to academic programs.

There are many reasons to celebrate the condition that more students will need to successfully obtain a degree, and thus provide market pressures to expand the number of students who have access to quality undergraduate education—and expand beyond higher education of 50 years ago in which class and income (even across race and gender) were the prime predictors of attendance and success at a university—at about the same time as this institution was born. These are not times without challenges—but it will be these challenges that will make us better. In fact, we must succeed.

I want to do a couple of things today—to comment on a few of many positive activities from last year, and to identify some projects that will help us create some institutional certainties even in uncertain times.

The activities of the past year—far more are summarized in the strategic plan updates on the president’s web page. But I highlight two items reflecting university wide recognition.

**New York Times** editorial in May of this year. This reviewed institutions that both over and under performed on the basis of student success given institutional characteristics of the student body and institutional support. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/05/23/opinion/sunday/college-graduation-rates-ranking.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage&te=1&nl=opinion-today&emc=edit_ty_20190524>

Clayton State was among the top ten performers nationally—students graduate at rates 13% higher than would be predicted by characteristics of incoming classes—the highest level of success for any Georgia Institution. And the reasons for this success: “But perhaps the biggest lesson from our reporting is that the colleges with higher rates of student success simply seem to have been trying harder for longer…The bottom line is connection — feeling like somebody cares.” This was from a cohort of students who were at the start of our intentional efforts for student success—this is exceptional testimony to you, and likely to portend future success.

The second recognition is CASE (Council for Advancement and Support of Education) Educational Fundraising Award “The beauty of this awards program is that we look at the data not knowing what institution is being represented. In showcasing these best-of-the-best programs, CASE helps its members identify institutions doing smart and innovative work from which everyone can learn,”” For colleges and universities that demonstrate significant program growth across the three years of data.” Consistent support of educational programs by faculty and staff of this institution is a tradtion of this institution, and foundational for the advances in development recognized by CASE.

The CASE award coincides with the coming conclusion of the University’s first comprehensive campaign, and the planning for our 50th birthday party.

We will be bringing Comprehensive Administrative Review to closure, to be discussed at a future session. And it leaves without saying some incredible individual achievements of faculty and staff and programs. But I cite these two as the beginning of external validation of the vision that increasingly, “Clayton State will become a national model for university based community engagement and for equipping students with the knowledge, skills and motivations for learning and success.”

I come now to part two of my observations—future activities.

I start with four requests for my colleagues, each of them consistent with the USG Momentum initiative—1) taking attendance and reporting attendance in every class you teach. Attendance through midterms (we are supposed to do this know as we are able to report the last day a student attended) has been happening anyway.

And that we use Roll call and the EAB platform to share attendance information early with academic advisors—using by RAs also to help get students to class—we believe this can have some powerful long-term effects of student success.

A meta-analysis by Crede, Roch and Kieszczynka confirms what many of us have known instinctively for a long time “These relationships make class attendance a better predictor of college grades than any other known predictor of academic performance, including scores on standardized admissions tests such as the SAT, high school GPA, study habits, and study skills. Results also show that class attendance explains large amounts of unique variance in college grades because of its relative independence from SAT scores and high school GPA and weak relationship with student characteristics such as conscientiousness and motivation.” It does not seem to come from mandatory attendance policies, so much as from persuasive strategies to bring students regularly to class or on-line.—but we believe it will come from reinforcement—and reinforcement across campus should have powerful long term effects.

2) Reinforcing an academic mind set in your students and for ourselves—this was discussed at length this morning about students. But it is vital that you give consideration to those belief structures as an instructor—knowing that such beliefs are not always easy—and are generally true, even if not true for every single student every time.

Coming year—focus on academic mindset—and connectedness of academic programs. Murphy and Fryberg earlier this year (from Indiana University)

“The overall message here is quite optimistic,” Murphy said. “Helping faculty understand how to employ growth mindset practices in their teaching could help thousands of students. After all, faculty set the culture of their classroom—they are the culture creators. This work suggests professors have the power to shape students’ motivation, engagement, and performance through the mindset culture that they create in their classrooms.”

3) Becoming increasingly intentional and systematic in partnerships with folks in public, private and non-profit sectors—BOOST, PACE, mailchimp and Launchpad program—must in order to make internship programs across the campus successful and scalable. Our own strategic plan commits us advancing these partnerships as a way to provide distinct parts of our success by advancing and solidifying these strategic partnerships—but not simply with external actors—but with each other. Collaborations remain an essential feature of our institutional values. I know Dr. Demmitt will be speaking more of this as he helps us explore future curriculum that brings us closer together across programs, departments, and colleges. But our ability to accomplish epic is the recollection that we cannot do epic by ourselves.

4) Becoming increasingly intentional in the area of enrollment management. The coordination of enrollment management offices this year under a vice president is one structural step in this direction. But we will need everyone’s assistance to raise enrollments without sacrificing academic standards and our efforts to have more of our students experience academic success. Progress on retention and graduation rates are at the heart of the multiple reasons for over performance of our students over prediction—flatness of enrollments must be addressed if we are to move beyond an essential flatness of budgetary resources, both from tuition and from long term claims on formula funding—we will set as an institution a commitment to increase total enrollment for Fall of 2020 by 500 additional students over Fall of 2019. The office of enrollment management, together with academic affairs and university advancement, will chart specific plans for increases across relevant enrollment areas—new traditional students, transfer students, graduate students, improved retention and success of current students, on-line students, and dual enrollment students— segmenting increases will provide the best opportunity for campus wide success—and this will require faculty, staff, and student work across the university.

There are several other on-going efforts which will continue to be part of our collective attention—and I mention these here also.

First, Year 4 of strategic plan—highlights in each of the categories found on the president’s web site—and will continue to drive activities across campus.

Second, SACSCOC (5 year report due in March)—working with Dr. Lane, we hope to once again use the standards of accreditation as a means of advancing university excellence—PACE and its first 4 years of success is but one example of that phenomenon

Third, benchmarking for compensation. Last year was the first time in several years that the state provided funds to support salary increases for faculty and staff. That was a start. But we will focus on continued process improvements that facilitate our learning—including review of compensation—and thus we will review benchmarks and develop multiyear strategies to approach those benchmarks for faculty and staff in the future.

Fourth, Inclusion and diversity—diversity is but an indication of similarities and differences—we cannot respond here in ways reported by one student at a sibling institution, that we only talk among ourselves, and thus we will have accomplished very little—it is through interactions, over time, in which even where there are disagreements in perspectives, we have created the conditions for those differences to be understood across those differences (put here the statement from the document) As noted in late spring, and through work with our faculty senate, a group including VP Abdullah, HR Director Byrd, and Provost Demmitt, initiated significant changes in the way in which we cultivate a commitment to inclusion and diversity on our recruitment process. From that a broader conversation across campus of next steps of institutionalizing inclusion will come from a university wide group to be established this fall. Out of this, I hope more of us will aspire—and help our students aspire to—what David Epstein refers to as “active open mindedness.” Tetlock and Mellers of the University of Pennsylvania suggested through their research that curiosity and a broad base of knowledge might be some kind of superpower—as Epstein notes, such thinkers do not hide from contrary and apparently contradictory views, but rather crossed discipline and political boundaries to seek them out. When all is said and done, creating such conditions for our students, our colleagues, and our community, may very well be what our learning goals ought to be about, and what inclusion of all members of our university community can do to provide a model for translating. And here we will continue to institutionally advance inclusion, as proposals for further work is advanced.

Fifth, a continuation work on recommendations last year. Our internal communication audit as well as the comprehensive administrative review indicated that we require process reviews in procurement, web communication, housing, purchasing, and bursar—and we will accelerate that work in coming months.

Challenges in higher education are significant.

Resources are constantly a limitation. Georgia has continued to provide formula support for higher education at levels higher than other states, and the Board of Regents has helped us as a system be intentional in the ways we have connected resources with student success. We do not have the experiences of states like Alaska or Kansas or Oklahoma, in which higher education is hamstrung. But we will continue to work to gain more resources, as limits continue to limit

A political climate exists nationally in which disagreements from both left and right are weaponized to attack individuals within the academy, and the academy and the value of higher education itself.

Nonetheless, we proudly serve students who have the ability to learn, but whose access to learning in the past was limited—the emerging economy will require that there be continued success by our students—and their ability to demonstrate that they have learned how to learn. We must reflect more deeply ourselves on ways in which our classes provide such opportunities

Our focus must continue to be on learning—learning for our students, our faculty, our staff, and our community. To the degree possible, our attention should focus on activities that either directly advance learning, or improve support services in ways that improve access to, or support for, actions that allow us to better support learning. Our goal is to use strategic plans as a means of focusing on learning, and to ask about the evidence available suggests that our activities advances student learning, or that the actions celebrate advances in this area.

The institution, even where there are differences in perspectives, knew that the aspiration of Harvard on the Southside was not an appropriate model. Some of you may know that I am a baseball fan. As one, I read and saw several times to film **Moneyball**, both chronicling GM Billy Bean’s application of data and analytics to decision making in baseball and the Oakland Athletics. As much as it pains me, for most of the 20th century, the New York Yankees were the Harvard of baseball—caught by the Boston Red Sox in the 21st century when they applied **Moneyball** principles. And the reality for the Oakland A’s was clear ““If we try to play like the Yankees in here (board room), we will lose to the Yankees out there (on the field).”

We have already begun to demonstrate the results of a focus on results for our students—and I am excited about that continuing into the future. Again citing **Moneyball**: “If you challenge the conventional wisdom, you will find ways to do things much better than they are currently done.” And concluding: “Hard work may not always result in success but it will never result in regret”

Thanks to my colleagues for their continued hard work that I believe will result in success, and certainly no regrets.

