

Thank you, Alison, and good morning everyone. Let me add my word of appreciation to Natalie and Damon for their earlier comments and for taking on their respective roles for Staff and Faculty senates.

As Alison said, I did not expect to be standing on this stage today. I thought I would be back in my role as associate provost for undergraduate studies and that I would be out there with my faculty and staff colleagues, listening as our new chancellor charted the path for the year ahead.

That was not be, however, and I am honored to continue serving as your acting provost.

So, on to the business of this morning.

STRATEGIC PLAN

First, for those of you who may have missed it over the summer break, in June our Board of Trustees unanimously approved an update to our “2020 Vision” strategic plan, originally adopted in 2012.

I was privileged to chair a campus committee tasked with examining the plan and revising it to reflect changes that have occurred over the past six or so years...things like the NC Promise tuition plan, a legislative mandate to launch a lab school, a new UNC System strategic plan, our Degree Plus Quality Enhancement Plan, the SACS-COC reaffirmation of accreditation process, and updated enrollment growth targets.

Despite those new circumstances, the primary reason for revising our strategic plan was to sharpen our institutional focus. We wanted to ensure that we maintain our bold vision for WCU, one that enables us to meet the needs of our students – and of the region and state that we serve.

This was not a ‘start-from-scratch’ effort. Truly, it was a revision – a tweaking, if you will – of the original plan, and our committee did not conduct its work in a vacuum.

We endeavored to hear from all members of the campus and surrounding communities. We held a series of town hall meetings in Cullowhee, Sylva, and Asheville, and launched a website where all stakeholders could provide input. The committee worked diligently to incorporate your feedback into the revised plan.

In addition to tweaking the six existing strategic directions to emphasize themes of excellence in the areas of academics, student experiences, regional and community engagement, faculty and staff support, infrastructure investment, and institutional vision and advancement, we have added a new strategic direction, based on your input.

This new strategic direction is focused on inclusive excellence. We felt it was essential to add it to the plan because issues of diversity and inclusion were among the most frequently heard topics in our public feedback sessions.

The committee also added elements of measurement, priority level, units of responsibility, and timeline to the plan, because we thought it was important to provide more specificity about expectations, assessment and deadlines.

I want to offer my sincere appreciation to the members of the strategic plan revision committee for their hard work last year, and I thank all of you who provided input and feedback throughout the process. Your insights were invaluable.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Allow me to circle back on that new strategic direction of inclusive excellence. Diversity and inclusion rose to the forefront in large part because of a series of racially charged incidents on campus in recent years.

In the wake of those events, you told the strategic plan committee that you value and respect diversity and inclusion. You urged us to demonstrate that this institution is serious about ensuring that diversity and inclusion are among our core values. So, we did.

In addition to ensuring a strong presence for diversity and inclusion in our strategic plan, we have updated our diversity website. It now includes information about tools and professional development for faculty and staff, upcoming events, bias reports, and links to resources available on and off campus.

Working with our partners in Communications and Public Relations, Marketing and Social Media, we launched the Diversity Dialogues Series, providing an opportunity for members of our campus community to talk about their unique perspectives on the world that we share. That series began with conversations with African-American students, and has expanded to include dialogues with members of our Native American and Hispanic student populations.

The Diversity Dialogues Series has been extremely well received. In fact, the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education honored the effort earlier this year with a regional Grand Award for best diversity programs and named it a finalist in a national competition.

The efforts of our professional staff in this area have been affirming, but I want to specifically highlight our student leaders' efforts, including those from the Whee Matter movement, to ensure that the university administration takes their concerns seriously.

We do, indeed, take these issues very seriously.

I also commend members of the faculty for organizing a "March for Equity" last spring to show their support for our students of color and other underrepresented communities.

Our students look to us as examples and mentors of the types of leadership they want to emulate, and I challenge each of us to live up to their high expectations.

CAMPUS THEME

These ongoing issues of diversity and inclusion had a large part in the selection of this year's campus-wide learning theme.

As returning faculty and staff will know, for the past eight years, we have selected a yearlong interdisciplinary theme designed to foster campus conversations, curricular and co-curricular connections, and academic enrichment. The point of each theme is to provide a vigorous educational experience for members of our campus community through a holistic look at a particular subject from various perspectives.

This year, our theme is "Defining America," and we will have a wide range of activities that will allow us to explore the people, the places, the experiences, and all the things that exemplify America, not just as a place, but as an ideal.

UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED LECTURE SERIES

This year, we will establish the University Distinguished Lecture Series, co-sponsored by Academic Affairs and the Center for the Study of Free Enterprise. The concept is to expose the campus community to a balance of perspectives from the nation's leading figures in education, politics, business, and beyond.

The purpose is to give students, faculty, staff, and community members direct access to the voices that are shaping the nation. The presentations will be designed to contribute to this year's "Defining America" theme.

The University Distinguished Lecture Series speakers for 2018-19 are

- poet and civil rights activist Nikki Giovanni, who will be at New Student Convocation on Friday;
- Former U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch, as part of the fall chancellor's list event;
- former RNC Chair and former Maryland Lieutenant Governor Michael Steele, for the spring chancellor's list event;
- Home Depot Co-Founder Ken Langone, coming in October;
- And Christina Henriquez, author of this year's One Book selection *The Book of Unknown Americans*, as part of the annual Spring Literary Festival.

NEW ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Allow me to share some great news about a few new academic programs. Both our original 2020 Vision strategic plan and the newly revised plan include goals of prioritizing academic programs in curricular focus areas and developing new “pathways to success” in critical fields that are vital to the economic and societal well-being of Western North Carolina.

This fall, we begin offering a new program in integrated health sciences to help prepare graduates to meet the health care needs of the people of this region and the state.

Graduates of this program will be prepared to fill various roles that support healthy living across diverse populations in businesses, community organizations, and numerous support positions throughout the health care industry and across a complex and evolving health care environment.

We also are growing our graduate programs in fields such as physical therapy, social work and counseling in Asheville at our Biltmore Park site in response to demand from educational, medical, industry, business, government, and nonprofit partners for a highly skilled and adaptive work force.

And, in January, the UNC Board of Governors approved the establishment of a doctoral program in psychology that will focus on enhancing the level of psychological services available in Western North Carolina. The psychology doctorate will be WCU’s fourth doctoral program.

The new “Psy.D”, with a primary focus of preparing psychological service providers as opposed to preparing graduates to teach and conduct research, will begin next fall. Dr. Jonathan Campbell, the new director of that program, however, has already joined us.

Dr. Campbell is a 1995 alumnus of WCU who has directed doctoral programs in psychology at several higher education institutions in the Southeast. And we are thrilled that he has returned to WCU. In addition, a new Latinx Studies minor is undergoing review by Faculty Senate, and a proposed African-American studies program is under development. These new minors will be a welcome addition to our program mix and will be important components in furthering our understanding of the value of inclusion.

LIBERAL STUDIES

And, finally, allow me to provide an update on the Liberal Studies Program, an essential element in the academic experience of our students.

During the last academic year, the Liberal Studies Committee refined its list of student learning outcomes to try to identify the essential skills we'd like to see our students gain through participation in general education courses.

The revised outcomes highlight a student's ability to ask thoughtful questions, to identify legitimate resources with which to answer those questions, to think critically about issues, to solve seemingly unsolvable problems, to express themselves articulately through spoken and written word, and to be self-aware, aware of diverse groups of people around them, and aware of their own impact on the world.

The Liberal Studies Program is in the process of implementing a phased roll-out of revised student learning outcomes over this academic year. Under the leadership of Dr. Jen Schiff, from the Department of Political Science and Public Affairs, the program is working toward improved assessment of these outcomes.

These efforts will ensure the overall quality of its communication with the campus community, while also more accurately identifying and evaluating the ways the Liberal Studies curriculum affects our most important charge – our students.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I urge each of you to continue to nurture our students this year—it is MY métier, my life’s work.

I pledge my commitment to maintaining our dedication to academic excellence, and to building on the legacy left by Chancellor Belcher.

David told us that he trusted us to continue this worthy work and, in life, “to be a verb and not a noun.”

As a two-time alumna of this institution, I feel a special sense of responsibility to live up to his expectations. I trust you will join me in that endeavor.

Thank you, and now back to Interim Chancellor Morrison-Shetlar.