

OPENING ASSEMBLY

INTERIM CHANCELLOR ALISON MORRISON-SHETLAR

Welcome, everyone, to a new year at Western Carolina University. Before we begin, I've asked Student Government Association Past President Katherine Spalding to help us with a special tribute to the man we're all missing this morning.

Chancellor David Belcher was our leader, our champion, and our inspiration. He reminded us that our work, and our lives, have purpose. That purpose is simple – everything we do should be about making a difference in the lives of our students. His ambition was their ambition. So, we'd like to remember him this morning through their eyes.

(Kathleen Spalding speaks; Alison Morrison-Shetlar returns to stage)

It seems a fitting tribute to Chancellor Belcher for us all to applaud our students, their hard work, and their ultimate success.

So, here's my takeaway from these students: Be unapologetically ambitious. Care deeply about the people we serve. Build a community that supports discovery and transformation. And, move bravely forward with the confidence that, if we keep giving all of ourselves to this great purpose of changing lives, as Joanna said, things *are* going to come together.

(Faculty Senate Chair Damon Sink and Staff Senate Chair Natalie Broom speak).

Thank you, Natalie, and thank you again, Damon. These are *your* elected leaders for our campus faculty and staff, and I hope you will engage with them and with your other colleagues on Faculty Senate and Staff Senate to share your needs, your concerns, and your ideas on how we can continue to improve Western Carolina University.

CHANCELLOR SEARCH UPDATE

We've come to the time in the program when we typically review our accomplishments over the past year. But before I get to that, I should address the reality that you were not expecting me to be standing up here this morning. You were expecting me to be back in my provost seat and for a newly appointed chancellor to be addressing you.

As you know, the Board of Governors met to discuss our chancellor search but did not take action on a candidate. That candidate later withdrew from the search, and the members of the board decided to put our search on hold while they review the process for selecting chancellors with new guidelines coming at some point in September. You may be feeling anxious and uncertain about what comes next.

You are not alone.

Much of what we are anxious and uncertain about, however, is out of our hands. What I can say with certainty is that we have an amazing chancellor search committee led by Board of Trustees Chair Pat Kaemmerling and Vice Chair Bryant Kinney.

They and the committee remain committed to the task of finding the next great leader for WCU, and they will not let us down.

YEAR IN REVIEW

I can also say that I will be like Joanna Woodson. I will be present in this role, and I will put everything I have into the job of interim chancellor, with the goal of supporting your success and the success of our students. It has taken everyone in this auditorium to build WCU into what it is today, and I know with your continued commitment, things *are* going to continue in the right direction.

We have all made choices every day that have led us to success. We can see that as we look back at our last year.

We worked hard across the university to recruit top-quality students. Yes, it was the work of Undergraduate Admissions and the Graduate School, but also of our Financial Aid and Scholarships offices, of our Honors College, of our University Marketing and Communications teams, of all of our staff who work in student services areas, of our deans, and of our hundreds of faculty members who attended Open House and talked with prospects.

We chose to collaborate as a campus on enrollment, and we admitted a record class with record-high standards.

We kicked off the year with a once-in-a-lifetime celestial event, and we chose to celebrate it together in central campus with a live-from-Cullowhee broadcast of the total solar eclipse.

Yet again, we worked together. Folks from IT, from our social media and video teams, from Campus Activities, from Special Events, and from several academic disciplines went far beyond the requirements of the job to make something amazing happen that day.

We opened renovated Brown Hall, providing much needed dining and programming space. We dedicated the newly named Judaculla Hall as part of a yearlong interdisciplinary learning theme in recognition of our longstanding partnership with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

We weathered some challenging racial incidents on campus, and we will continue to do so. In fact, this year's learning theme, "Defining America," ties in nicely with our university's efforts in enhancing diversity and inclusion on our campus. Carol Burton will provide more detail on this shortly.

We received a significant infusion of enrollment growth money, and we chose to invest almost \$4 million of that new money in our people – \$1.5 million went into hiring new faculty, \$890,000 went into hiring new staff, and \$1.4 million was dedicated to salary increases for our existing faculty and staff.

We celebrated Chancellor Belcher and Susan's incredible choice to make a \$1.23 million commitment to WCU's "Lead the Way" comprehensive campaign. Chancellor Belcher always knew how to set the bar high. And, I would argue that we have always responded with a willingness to reach for that bar, even sometimes beyond it.

Our Campaign Steering Committee was inspired to increase the goal of the “Lead the Way” Campaign from \$50 million to \$60 million and to expedite the timeline. We launched the public phase of the campaign this year and have already exceeded the original goal – and are well on our way to \$60 million.

We showcased WCU to leadership from Raleigh at a tremendous celebration as we broke ground for the Apodaca Science Building.

By the way, we chose to launch the campaign and break ground on the science building all in a 24-hour period. Once again, we worked together – Advancement, Facilities Management, the Chancellor’s Division, IT, Academic Affairs, Athletics. Many of you were a part of one or both of those events. And thanks to all of you, it was truly an incredible week in Cullowhee.

The momentum continued. We received the first half of the money to replace our aging steam museum. We began construction of a new upper campus residence hall.

Our student-athletes took that competitive spirit into the classroom, and we led the Southern Conference in student academic performance with an average team GPA of 3.0 and the largest ever number of student-athletes earning a GPA of 3.5 or better.

We finalized, thanks to a committee led by our Acting Provost Carol Burton, a revision of our 2020 Strategic Plan. Carol will share more about that shortly.

And, this summer, we lost a great leader. I want to quote from Chancellor Belcher's remembrance video and say: "While we feel his loss, he leaves us not empty but full – full of determination to live up to the potential he saw in each of us."

That is certainly how I feel. Determined. Ready to move ahead, embracing our forward and upward momentum, despite the obstacles that we will most definitely face.

It is the end of an era at WCU, but the beginning of a legacy. We have achieved incredible things, together. We have embraced our mission – our purpose. We have changed lives. We cannot push pause on our momentum. Our students deserve more.

With that in mind, I'm incredibly thankful for Dr. Carol Burton and her willingness to continue to serve as acting provost.

Carol is a graceful, confident, humble, and unbelievably wise leader. She knows this institution and she knows you. She is deeply committed to our students and to academic excellence, and we are so grateful to have her in this role.

I'd like to ask her now to talk with you a bit about the revised Strategic Plan and about the academic year ahead.

(Carol Burton speaks; Alison Morrison-Shetlar returns to the stage)

Thank you, Carol. I must say that I'm really excited about our strategic plan's revision, and the timing could not be more perfect. We know exactly where we are headed.

THE YEAR AHEAD

We have our largest freshman class headed our way – and I do mean LARGE. We expect enrollment to be record-setting across the board, not just new first-year students but new transfer and new graduate students.

We also know that the UNC System will be launching a robust marketing campaign to promote NC Promise and that word of mouth will continue to build in the coming year.

We must continue to grow to meet the needs of students and the demands of our region and our state. But, we will choose to grow responsibly and sustainably, with a focus on maintaining academic excellence and delivering an unmatched total student experience.

I'm looking forward to working with athletics in the year ahead to support their work to continue leading our conference in student-athlete accomplishments in the classroom.

Our 16 athletic teams are part of that total student experience, and I know athletics will be working hard to get more students to more games this coming year to support our student-athletes on the courts and the fields.

I'm looking forward to seeing more students attending all of our events on campus – seeing them in the arts, at performances, at plays and readings, and much more.

We will have an active and potentially contentious election cycle and continued national, and likely on-campus, dialogue around inclusivity.

As Carol noted earlier, we chose to add a new initiative to the strategic plan to reaffirm our commitment to “Inclusive Excellence.” That includes a goal of developing a robust university diversity and inclusion plan, and we dive in to that goal this year.

Our region is moving forward, and we will not only be at the table but be a leader in the conversation about regional progress. We’ll host the first of what we hope to be an annual conference supporting the outdoor products industry.

We will be an active participant in the conversation about improving broadband access in the most rural parts of our region. In fact, the university has just reached an agreement with a local broadband provider that will expand high-speed internet access to underserved areas of the Cullowhee Valley through use of WCU-owned utility poles and other equipment.

We will choose to work collaboratively, across divisions, to leverage our strengths to improve the communities we serve.

Our strategic plan reaffirms our choice to continue to invest in recruiting and retaining the very best employees and in providing professional development resources for our faculty and staff. We recognize that it is our people who make our institution great.

With funds provided by the General Assembly, we will implement a 2 percent salary increase for our SHRA staff, and we are excited to implement the new salary floor of \$31,200 for all permanent, 12-month employees.

And, our Facilities Management teams will be very busy this year!

We will finish and open our upper campus residence hall before this time next year. We will begin framing the new science building. We will give our campus entrance a total makeover with a new entrance sign. We will continue several renovation projects all over campus. And we will continue planning for a lower campus residence hall and for construction of a new steam plant.

We'll also continue to modernize our data systems across the university and use data to make decisions that are right for the university and our success.

Did you notice I didn't mention parking – that's because I'm not going to...but there will be some more coming online soon.

Juggling all of this will not be easy, and it will not come without some pain, but we will press on, investing in an infrastructure that will prepare us for the future we are building together.

Our Advancement team has an ambitious goal in front of them. I challenge each of you to ask yourself how you can – and will – contribute to the success of the “Lead the Way” campaign, which has been inspired by the Belcher years.

I'm not necessarily talking about making a gift (although we welcome that). I'm talking about making fund-raising and friend-raising a part of your job, too.

We can choose to stand by and hope our awesome Advancement team gets the job done, or we can dig in and work alongside them to make sure we reach our ambitious \$60 million goal and develop a culture of philanthropy. If we work together, I know we can not only reach but surpass that goal.

As I said earlier, we have all made choices that have led Western Carolina University to the success we have enjoyed for the past few years. We have all worked hard to get here.

That drive, that willingness to reach for the highest bar, that passion in our work – it is exactly what we always look for in our students. It’s what we push them toward. It’s how we help them build their personal success.

This year, University Marketing will launch a new campaign that is all about recruiting students with drive and determination. It’s not a new concept. Really, we’ve been doing this for years. It’s who we are. It is part of the DNA of Western Carolina University. Let’s hear from a few of our university leaders followed by a preview of our new TV campaign.

(Video plays, Alison Morrison-Shetlar returns to the stage)

CONCLUSION

The most important choice, is the choice to be great. It’s what we’re asking of our students, and it’s what we should be asking of ourselves.

Yes, this work we do is hard. Resources are limited. There have been and will be setbacks.

But we are persistent. We are innovative. We know how to work together. We have clear direction. We are already on a path to success. And we understand our mission – our purpose – is centered on students and their accomplishments.

So, let’s choose to be great. Let’s choose it together. Let’s give this year everything we’ve got. Let’s start today.

Choose great! Go Cats!