

*(Remarks as delivered will vary from remarks as written)*

Opening Assembly

August 14, 2019

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What an incredible year you've had! It's beyond impressive. Dennis and I are thrilled to be here and to start a new year as part of such a close-knit and special community.

Your accomplishments over the past twelve months have set the bar high, but I want you to know I am already working hard to continue the excellence to which Western Carolina University is already accustomed.

I am eager to get to know the incredible faculty and staff who obviously care so deeply about – and who work so hard for – this outstanding university.

Allow me to take a moment and thank Provost Alison Morrison-Shetlar, Vice Provost Carol Burton, and all the members of Executive Council for stepping forward during a period of sadness and transition for this university to ensure that WCU continued its incredible upward momentum.

And thank you, Dr. Gomez, for that kind introduction. I look forward to working with you, with Ms. Joseph, and with the members of Faculty Senate and Staff Senate as we carry out the longstanding tradition of shared governance here at Western.

I have said it before, and I will say it again: I believe that we will do our best work when we work together.

And to all of you, my new university family, thank you for the warm welcome that you have given to me and Dennis since our arrival here. I am deeply honored and humbled to be serving as the 12th chancellor of Western Carolina University.

I have officially been in my new role for one month and 14 days (who's counting!), and I am 100 percent certain that my initial impressions were right on the money – WCU is a very special place.

Those of you who have been here for a while already know this to be true. And those of you who are like me and are new to your roles, you soon will be convinced of this fact – if you have not already reached the conclusion that there is just something special, something unique, something almost magical about this university and Cullowhee.

I had the opportunity a couple of weeks ago to meet with a group of Western alumni from the class of 1969 at a Purple and Gold reunion. I was so incredibly impressed with the affinity that these proud alumni had for their beloved alma mater, 50 years after their graduation.

Their passion for WCU was palpable, and they noted repeatedly that the relationships they forged here have resonated with them down the years. I believe the fact that so many alumni remain connected and engaged with this institution speaks volumes and provides additional evidence that this is, indeed, a special place.

When I first walked into the chancellor's office on Day 1 – it was Monday, July the first – I had to stop for a minute to catch my breath, because I realized that, oh my gosh...I am in exactly the right place. I hope that does not sound off-putting, because what I mean is that I believe my entire professional career has prepared me to serve Western Carolina University.

Over the past 30 years, I have had the opportunity to be involved with higher education at six different universities, including Western Illinois University, Illinois State, University of South Florida and University of Florida.

Before coming here, I served as provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Georgia College. I also did a stint as interim president at Valdosta State University, which, like WCU, is a public regional comprehensive university.

### **MY BACKGROUND**

I will talk a bit more about the importance of public regional comprehensive universities in our ever-changing world in a few minutes. But first I want you to know that I am an academic at heart. I love the academy, I love higher education, and I absolutely 'geek out' on all things higher ed.

A colleague at a previous institution once remarked that I was the only person she had ever met who read *The Chronicle of Higher Education* from cover to cover. Every. Single. Week.

Now, I don't want you to think that, as a little girl growing up showing horses in the Midwest, I had already plotted out my career trajectory. I don't know many children who grow up dreaming of being a university president. In fact, I never even pictured myself going to college.

But my parents had bigger hopes for me and my two siblings. My mom and dad were adamant that we go to college – in large part because they wanted better lives for us than they had growing up. They saw the value of a college degree and wanted their kids to have it. As kids, we had no choice – we were going to college. So, I enrolled in a local technical college and became a dental hygienist.

Realizing there may be more beyond dental hygiene, I worked during the day and went to school at night at the University of Toledo. It was there that I was bitten by the higher ed bug, earning my bachelor's and master's degrees before going on to obtain my doctorate in health education.

On a very personal note, I mentioned my mother, Charlene, earlier. She passed away in 2013 and never really got a chance to see me in my provost role. But I know she is watching me now, and that she could not be any prouder. She guided, nudged, encouraged, supported and inspired me to work hard, despite disappointments or setbacks, and I am the woman I am today because of her.

We all have people in our lives who have nudged us along the way, suggested an opportunity such as going to graduate school or maybe getting involved in a special program, or have encouraged us to challenge ourselves to apply for an award or scholarship.

I feel pretty confident that WCU faculty, staff and alumni have encouraged, nudged, supported and inspired many students to go a little further, take a chance, do something they never thought of. This is what makes WCU a very special place.

I joined the academy as an assistant professor at Western Illinois University. There, I learned how to teach. I learned how to be a faculty member. I learned how to serve on committees, how to work with colleagues, how to guide and

nurture students, and all the things that faculty members do when they are down in the trenches.

I learned the value of shared governance and those in leadership roles, as well as the importance of staff across the university that kept the university moving forward – housing, facilities, student life, grounds, administrative assistants – all working toward a common goal of student success.

But you all know this. You do this every single day. The work that we do day in and day out, to help improve the lives of our students and, through them, our community, our region and our state, gives meaning to all the little and big things we do.

I am so glad to be here and to be working with you – collaboratively, in this university’s tradition of shared governance – on what my predecessor often characterized as “this wonderful business of changing lives.”

Speaking of my predecessor, I must acknowledge that I am following in the footsteps of a beloved leader. Chancellor Belcher’s impact on this university is immeasurable, and he will remain an inspiration and guiding light to me as I take the mantle of leadership here.

I believe that all leaders stand upon the shoulders of those who came before. Just as David Belcher built upon the solid foundation left by his predecessor, I pledge to do everything within my power to ensure that this university continues to thrive during my time among its stewards.

### **OVER THE SUMMER**

You may be wondering what I’ve been up to over the summer so far. I have spent a good bit of my time immersing myself in all-things-Western. I have been listening to and learning from university stakeholders.

I have held meetings to get to know my executive leadership team, attended meetings of the Staff Senate, addressed some of the newest members of our campus community at New Faculty Orientation, visited with a large gathering of the Catamount faithful at my first official alumni function in Greensboro, and talked about our athletics programs with members of the Catamount Club Board of Directors.

I have met with leaders from some of our region's community colleges, had conversations with local and state elected officials, been interviewed by members of the news media, and enjoyed getting to know many of this university's leaders at my first Chancellor's Leadership Council retreat.

I am attempting to hear from all university stakeholders. I want to know what our constituents like best about Western, what things they think the university does well, and what things they think we could do better.

These conversations will help inform me as I develop my vision for the university and any new strategic directions I would like to pursue. Although I do have some early ideas, I dare not come into this role thinking that I have all the answers.

I also have spent some time over the summer diving into the book "A Mountain Heritage: The Illustrated History of Western Carolina University." I read about Robert Lee Madison, who founded the Cullowhee Academy in 1889. I read about the Noble Nine, who supported the notion of training teachers here in the Cullowhee Valley to help spread educational opportunities to the children of the mountains of far western North Carolina.

I learned about the Cullowhee Idea and its objective of improving the lives of the people of the mountain region through education. That idea, that grand experiment, would become the model for other regional colleges across North Carolina. And it would provide the genesis of Western's fundamental identity as a public regional comprehensive university.

## **ON REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVES**

I mentioned earlier that I would return to the topic of public regional comprehensive institutions. I believe that all types of institutions of higher education are important – from the community colleges and technical schools that provide their graduates with needed skills in the trades and in health care careers to the big R-1s and doctoral universities.

But I think regional comprehensive universities, like WCU, are the most important because of their role in expanding the reach of higher education to include many of our under-represented populations of learners.

Western Carolina University – and other institutions like us – are where first-generation students go to achieve a better quality of life than their parents.

We're the place where students show up on our doorstep, looking for answers to questions that they don't even know they should be asking. We're the place for those who are not sure how in the world they are going to be able to pay for tuition and fees, or who don't know how they are going to be able to juggle schoolwork, a job and a family.

We're the place where faculty and staff take the time to help the myriad of students who walk in and immediately feel lost. We're the likely place of choice for the new majority, the place where a diverse group of students will seek an education, to earn their degrees.

It may seem like a heavy burden, because it is a heavy burden; a burden you all have been proudly shouldering for years.

Did you know that 40 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States in 2018 were awarded by places like Western? Perhaps that's not a surprise to many of you.

Dr. Bruce Henderson from the Department of Psychology almost certainly knew that fact. Dr. Henderson knew the value of public regional comprehensive universities nearly a dozen years ago when he wrote a book on the subject, titled "Teaching at the People's University."

In his book, he describes how public comprehensive universities make college degrees possible for an increasing percentage of American citizens – especially for the children of those who struggle economically.

He explains that these institutions provide practical, job-oriented degrees in a variety of fields that are important to the regions in which those schools are located. Sounds a bit like the Cullowhee Idea, doesn't it?

### **PRIORITIES FOR 2019-20**

This leads me into some of the early priorities I see for my first year as chancellor.

Foremost among my initial priorities is to ensure that we continue an institutional emphasis on quality and excellence. Western Carolina University has a reputation for delivering a high-quality education at a reasonable cost.

Yes, enrollment grew last year with the beginning of NC Promise and the appeal of \$500-per-semester tuition for North Carolina residents. But WCU was growing long before NC Promise was a gleam in a legislator's eye.

Western has seen enrollment growth during the past decade, which is directly attributed to the high-quality academic programs and the excellent student experiences offered at Western. We must not diverge from that path of quality and excellence.

And, as the university continues to grow strategically we must not lose sight of what makes WCU so very special. We must continue to provide the small class sizes and the close relationships between our faculty and students that have been a hallmark of Western for decades.

And we must make sure we do NOT lose our sense of place and our sense of purpose. The universities that succeed are the ones that know who they are and, perhaps more importantly, know who they are not.

The universities that succeed are the ones who understand the importance of doing the things they do very well. They don't jump on the bandwagon and start trying to do something new just because some competing institutions are doing it.

To put it another way, there is value to knowing exactly who we are and what we stand for. I've referred to this as "staying in our lane," but I don't mean it in a restrictive manner.

In the year ahead, I think we need to take a good look at all the things that we are doing, and identify the things that we are doing well. We need to find the resources to continue to do the things that we do well and, in fact, do those things even better.

We may find that there are some things that we really don't need to be doing because they may not be part of our core mission. If that is the case, we may need to redirect resources to the things that are a part of our mission.

We must be good stewards of our state funding and the dollars directed our way by students and their families through the tuition, fees, and rates that they pay.

Also among my initial areas of focus is a continued and enhanced attention to diversity and inclusive excellence. WCU must continue our emphasis on diversity and inclusion and, in fact, we must ramp up our efforts and initiatives in this important area. The nation's racial and ethnic profile is changing and we must embrace that change.

One of the things I'm most excited about in the coming weeks is the dedication of Lavern Hamlin Allen Hall, named for WCU's first African-American student. Allen Hall is the first building on our campus named for an African-American.

What a legacy! And Dr. Allen herself will be here on September 5<sup>th</sup> to help us celebrate that milestone.

In another aspect of inclusive excellence, diversity of thought and experience is broader than ever, yet more polarized than ever. WCU must hold fast to the notion that universities are a place where students can explore different modes of thinking, be provoked out of their comfort zones, and apply a critical lens to their own beliefs and viewpoints.

And here at WCU, we also need to maintain and expand our longstanding partnership with the people of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Few universities have the opportunity to partner with a sovereign nation that shares our love for this place and this community. We owe it to them and we owe it to ourselves to leverage that opportunity for good.

Here at Western, we know who we are and what we stand for. We know we must remain committed to our mission of serving Western North Carolina and our state, and staying true to our roots as a public regional comprehensive university.

We do this not only by providing higher education opportunities to the citizens of our region, but also by serving as an engine of economic development for our communities, which is why regional economic development will be a primary focus for me as chancellor.

Imagine for a moment what Jackson County would be like if there was no such thing as Western Carolina University here. Imagine the impact on the economy of

this county and, in fact, on the economy of all of Western North Carolina and the state of North Carolina as a whole.

Yes, we provide higher education for the people of the region – students become graduates, and many graduates remain in the region and contribute to their communities and the local economy.

But we also contribute directly to the economy of this region. Our faculty and staff, whether they come from the local area or move here from other places, contribute to the local and regional economy.

We must pay attention to all of these factors, because public opinion concerning institutions of higher education is not as high as it once was. The public seems to be losing faith in higher education, as costs increase and people begin to doubt the value of a college degree and to question the return on investment.

But that narrative must be challenged! Despite the recent downturn in public confidence in higher education, I believe that perception will improve over time.

While in the next 30 years, we will have fewer four-year universities – including both public and private institutions – I firmly believe that there will always be universities that thrive.

And even in the face of the growth of distance and online education, I believe there will always be a place for brick-and-mortar institutions of higher education.

Fundamentally, I am confident that there will always be a need for universities like Western Carolina University – those public regional comprehensive institutions that serve the underserved – the rural residents, the first-generation students, the nontraditional students, the students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, the young people who work hard to earn a place here for their own betterment and the betterment of their families.

But to remain relevant, we must focus our attention on those things that are within our mission. This will be important going forward as we begin discussions with the University of North Carolina regarding the right size for Western and the capacity our institution has for growth.

As I continue to have meetings with our stakeholders throughout the fall, I plan the following question to be among the topics of our conversations: How do we

continue to be the best partner we can be with our community, our region, and our state.

I believe that Western has the opportunity to be a thought leader, a model of how regionally engaged universities can maintain a student-centered focus, with high levels of teaching innovation.

We are already doing well in this regard. Did you know that Western retains and graduates first-generation and diverse students at a rate that exceeds the national average? And that we do this at the same time that our academic profile is increasing and that our costs are more affordable than ever?

Think about that – WCU serves a region that continues to struggle in the wake of the Great Recession, serves a population where four out of every 10 students are first-generation and have significant financial need, and, yet, we retain eight out of 10 of our freshmen, and more, importantly, six out of 10 of our entering students graduate from Western within six years.

This is not some happy accident. It is a product of excellence. It is a product of what we do – what you do – day in and day out.

You will hear me talking about excellence a lot. I think, as a nationally-regarded regional comprehensive university, we must always be striving for excellence – excellence in all that we do.

## **CONCLUSION**

To summarize, I think there are three main themes that will guide our work for the year ahead.

First – enhance faculty, student, staff, and institutional excellence by focusing on excellence in experiences across the board.

Second – embrace diversity and inclusive excellence by continuing to expand our efforts to ensure that WCU is a welcoming community for all.

And third – transform regional economic development and community engagement by enhancing our efforts in regional and economic outreach.

I believe that Western is ready to hone its focus on institutional excellence. I see evidence of the hard work already underway in the areas of economic

development and community engagement. And I know of the past struggles with issues of diversity and inclusion, and of the university's efforts to improve and enhance what we are doing to ensure that this university is a welcoming place for all to study, to work, and to live.

I know that Western Carolina University is ready for the challenges and opportunities ahead. This university is getting it done! And I am ready to carry that message to the living rooms of prospective students, to the boardrooms of prospective employers, and to the halls of our state legislature.

Chancellor Belcher had it right: We are in the business of changing lives. And the great thing is that we not only change the lives of our students, we change the lives of their families, and the lives of many in their communities. Our reach is long and our influence is deep; it is part of the overarching commitment to access, quality and excellence.

As chancellor, I am rolling up my sleeves and getting down to the hard work of promoting and advocating on behalf of my – of your – of our – university. And I need your help to make that happen.

Please join me as we begin a new era of excellence for Western Carolina University, an era in which we honor the traditions of our past and embrace the innovations of today that will lead us into the future. Together we will decide to succeed beyond our wildest dreams.

Thank you for being here today. Let's have a great year...and go Cats!