

**Convocation 2022**  
**President Ellen Neufeldt**  
**Remarks as prepared**

Good morning! Thank you, Carl!

And thank you, Yvonne, for your thoughtful video message.

The depth and breadth of issues our Academic Senate tackled last year was truly unprecedented – I appreciate all that you do.

And, Julia, it has been an honor to watch your student leadership these last few years.

ASI gives such a critical voice to our students and the issues that are important to them.

Our students are our inspiration and our “why” – it’s an honor to be a partner with you in their success.

Welcome to Convocation 2022!

Can you believe we’re starting another academic year?

Whether you are with us in person or watching virtually, I want to warmly welcome all of you to the 2022-2023 academic year!

For some, this is your first Cal State San Marcos Convocation!

In fact, just a few weeks ago I met some of our new professors at our New Faculty Institute.

A big thanks to Faculty Center Director Dr. Rebecca Lush for the invite to stop by and say hello.

I was so proud to be in a room with 31 new tenure-track faculty – the highest number of new tenure-track hires in over five years, and a reflection of Provost Kemnitz’s commitment to fill vacancies and allocate dollars to increase our tenure density.

Since last year we’ve filled several key positions including:

- Dr. Ron Ramirez, dean of the College of Business Administration;
- Dr. Liora Gubkin, dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences; and
- Vice president of Student Affairs, Dr. Viridiana Diaz!

Welcome to everyone!

It seems like just a few weeks ago we were celebrating our 4,400 graduates at commencement.

I can’t wait to see what they do as they start their new beginnings.

And I’m grateful for this new beginning, and the opportunity to come together in community to share a vision of the year ahead.

Let me begin with a message of gratitude.

To our faculty, our staff, our managers – to everyone who is a part of this special campus community: Thank you.

Even as some aspects of the pandemic have improved, we're still being personally and professionally tested.

A big shoutout to our COVID-19 Leadership Team and our Public Health Subcommittee who continue to monitor and help us make plans for safety, continuity and care.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we've had to adapt and change – sometimes on a dime.

And we've also been witness to inspiring moments of solidarity, generosity and care.

When I look back on all that we have been through these last 2 1/2 years, a clear and compelling story emerges:

A story of a university community bound by a deep sense of purpose, driven by an unyielding commitment to a shared mission of supporting and serving students and our region.

Launching a strategic planning process in the midst of a pandemic may not have been optimal, but the context of the crisis gave us a critical lens for our conversations.

Thank you for your input and participation throughout the process.

You helped bring to life our new institutional mission, vision and values, which build on our 32-year legacy, taking us to even greater heights.

Together, we are doubling down on an ambitious mission to magnify opportunities even further for our amazing students.

And by doing so we will further transform lives and communities across the region we call home.

Our strategic plan sets us on a course to become a national leader in social mobility:

- A first-choice university for first-generation students and future generations of students.
- And we will do this as we drive intellectual engagement, innovation and sustainability for a diverse, global society.
- Our graduates, prepared by exemplary academic programs, won't just be leaders but change makers.

Many of you are now helping move us from strategic plan to strategic action.

Just last month, Academic Affairs hosted a two-day training session with the Society of College and University Planners that many of you participated in.

And on a parallel track, our Chief Diversity Officer Dr. Aswad Allen is leading an inventory project of diversity initiatives.

Together, you are helping us bring our strategic plan to life, charting our course for the future.

This isn't to say that we haven't had some difficult moments and hard conversations last year.

We've talked about how some individuals in our community have not lived up to our values and expectations – whether related to fiscal stewardship or sexual harassment and misconduct.

As I've said before, I wish that we would not see this sort of behavior at our university, that individuals would never overstep their authority, abuse power, hurt people or steal resources.

While I could never promise you a perfect university, I can tell you that when these moments occur, we will take a step back and look at what we can do to turn a crisis into an opportunity to do and be better.

And we did just that with fiscal stewardship.

Together we:

- Implemented new checks and guardrails.
- Brought in an external auditing firm to review our work.
- And hired an internal auditor to conduct regular reviews – including on the Office of the President.

You can read those reports on our website.

Additionally, back in the early days of my listening and learning tour, many of you shared there were frustrating pain points related to some business processes.

While we are proud to have completed our mission of strengthening internal controls, those changes are now being tested.

The next phase of our work, underway now, is ensuring that we are considering the human impact of our processes and transactions, improving your experience while also maintaining those important guardrails we worked so hard to implement.

Because it's about how we create a culture of care – across our campus in all that we do – that makes a difference in our overall success as an institution.

I really want to thank VP Leon Wyden and his team for their wonderful and ongoing work in this, along with so many of you.

Stay tuned – more to come on this.

Another inflection point for our campus – and across higher education – is related to Title IX and how we navigate systemic issues, deeply rooted attitudes, and harmful behaviors.

As you know, last fall I charged a sexual harassment taskforce to come together.

Under the leadership of co-chairs Dr. Ranjeeta Basu and Dr. Gloria Pindi, the group has been working on recommendations.

They delivered a very thoughtful report to me over the summer.

I will be meeting with them again early this semester, at which point I will share the report with you, as well as next steps as a university.

I also shared that we would conduct an independent review of our Title IX processes, which is happening now.

And another independent review of all 23 campuses, announced earlier this year by the Chancellor's Office, will be conducted here in October.

And let me just note: By no means does a review of our work take away from the hard work, professionalism and service of those who manage these complex issues every day.

I appreciate their ongoing commitment as we take this step back to see where we can grow and improve.

We know that this work is the foundation on which our success as a university rests.

We also know that now more than ever our students are relying on us to nurture an institutional culture of support – COVID-19 has not made it easy on them.

Earlier this summer, I was an invited speaker at the AASCU Provost Academy.

What I heard from academic leaders from across our country were echoes of the same conversations and concerns that we are having here.

Conversations about stepping back to reassess our practices and student-facing processes with fresh eyes.

As it was my turn to present, I acknowledged that while our students have struggled, I have been so proud of how everyone has pulled together to understand and respond to their needs.

As so many rightly said during our strategic planning process, we can't come out of the pandemic as we went into it.

To that end, just last week, Provost Carl Kemnitz and Vice President of Student Affairs, Viridiana Diaz brought together a cross-divisional team to map the student life cycle – from first point of contact through graduation and post-bac success – and chart a new course of possibilities to meet our students where they are.

A great example of this was demonstrated in how so many worked together to increase the average first-year student course unit load.

Over 1,400 first-year students are enrolled in 15 or more units this fall.

That's a 27% increase over last year, an all-time high.

This is key because data shows that taking 15 units a semester leads to stronger grades, while decreasing time to graduation.

Another great example is how we are re-engaging our incoming second-year students in light of COVID.

To connect and set them up on a path of success, our PASS Center, Student Success Coaching teams, and Office of Undergraduate Studies, have been meeting with students to implement second-year success plans.

Our academic advisers have also been on a roll, connecting with thousands of new students to support their enrollment through the summer.

And I want to give a shout out to IITS, including Interim CIO John Humes and his team, who have together put in hundreds of hours to save the day in the migration of classes into Canvas.

And they've done this while also working to get our classrooms technology-ready, pushing around the clock due to supply chain issues.

Well done, to everyone!

Something that the pandemic has also taught us is that we need to think more carefully about how we deliver student services, experiences and programs.

Our University Library has been a model of this through the Cougars Affordable Learning Materials program, which helps faculty replace costly textbooks with lower cost or free alternatives.

Library Journal recently published a case study on our efforts to bolster our course reserves – an effort that saved our students over \$4 million dollars in three years.

No small feat given that textbook costs are cited as one of the top concerns of students.

I've been so proud to see and hear about all the ways you continue to lead from where you are in supporting our students.

Some faculty have let me know how they have reached out to students who were struggling or disengaging from their classes.

Back in May, a parent took the time to email me to praise economics professor Dr. Quinn Keefer.

The parent, who is currently deployed overseas, was worried about his son's engagement and academic success.

He credited Dr. Keefer's encouragement and care for pushing his son over the finish line to graduation.

I've also seen our staff lead with compassion, kindness and positivity.

It was an honor to recently bestow Employee of the Month to Obdulia Perez Soriano, one of our hardworking custodians.

I received three separate nominations for Obdulia, noting how much she goes out of her way to greet and welcome our students and employees and keep spaces safe and clean.

Each person noted how much her positive spirit impacted their day.

We must never take for granted how the smallest acts of kindness can make big waves of success for our entire campus.

Whether through major initiatives or in the small everyday moments, we are working to move the needle to help students overcome obstacles and get to the graduation finish line.

Many of those efforts begin even before they arrive on campus.

For example, our Early Assessment Program was awarded a \$45,000 grant from our Chancellor's Office to promote college readiness with our regional high school counselors – focusing on those schools particularly hard hit during the pandemic.

And you already know about our Alliance program, which has nearly a dozen MOUs with educational partners to support K-12 students and their families in becoming college-ready.

In February, we expanded the Alliance by signing an MOU with the Coalition on Black and African American Education – a group of about a dozen leaders that serve our regional Black and African American community.

I want to acknowledge everyone who was key in forming this partnership and are now moving it beyond simply a signed agreement.

It has been – and continues to be – a university-wide effort working hand-in-hand with our community.

And it is absolutely another example of the Power of US in action.

As we work to create a campus that provides our students with a sense of community, belonging and home, we want to increase the visibility and voice of our many diverse communities.

We are a proud Hispanic Serving Institution, as you know, a federal designation based on enrollment demographics.

While the federal government defines HSIs based on enrollment, it doesn't define how we support our Latinx students.

This past spring Dr. Renzo Lara, director of our Latinx Center, led our HSI Summit to delve into how we enhance our serving capacity.

And the Latinx Center – in partnership with the Black Student Center – is also taking the lead on the creation of a Young Males of Color initiative.

We were even able to sponsor students to attend a leadership conference this spring.

Our HSI Summit dovetailed with a National Social Mobility symposium in June.

Emceed by CSU Board of Trustees Chair Wenda Fong, the symposium was just another way we were able to showcase our commitment to student success.

During a student panel, I felt so much pride as students spoke about the programs – from Project Rebound to Veterans Services to faculty mentoring – that have made such a difference in their lives.

And we know there is more to do – especially in this changing landscape of higher education.

As we look ahead, part of that will be about how we create additional spaces and opportunities for community and belonging.

I really want to thank the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Student Experience Taskforce, chaired by Cross Cultural Center Director Floyd Lai, for all their work this past year.

They just finalized a report with recommendations for how we expand support for our APIDA students, while also recognizing and honoring the rich diversity they bring to our campus community.

As one next step, we will be creating an APIDA student center.

I also want to mention that we achieved ANAPISI status again last year, a federal designation for institutions with at least a 10% undergraduate population of Asian Americans and Native American<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> Pacific Islanders.

As we move this important work forward, a group has formed to identify what we can further do to support the success of our American Indian students.

I've also committed to opening an American Indian student center – so important given that we have for years been one of the only CSUs with a growing population of American Indian students.

I look forward to the recommendations that will be forthcoming from a work group, co-chaired by Dr. John Tippeconnic III and Dr. Gail Cole-Avent.

I know how important these spaces are for creating a sense of true belonging on our campus – and many of them are celebrating milestone anniversaries this year.

Our Black Student Center celebrated 5 years in February – thank you to Director John Rawlins III for being integral in forging the amazing trajectory of the center.

And our PRIDE Center, led by Director Robert Aiello Hauser, is gearing up to celebrate its 15th anniversary!

Over the years, with Robert's leadership, the Pride Center has been an on-campus home and place of belonging for so many students – including Ashton Lawson, who I recently had the chance to meet.

Ash's advocacy and work as a peer mentor in the Pride Center and Office of Inclusive Excellence led to their receiving a notable PFLAG scholarship – putting them in the impressive company of previous winners, including San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria.

I know that we have been through some tough times lately.

Someone recently mentioned to me that the challenges we face can be overwhelming.

But hearing success stories like Ash's really centers me.

And while I must acknowledge that there are many things we need to continue to work on, it's not whether or not we face challenges, it's about how we do it: openly and head on, ensuring any crisis we experience is also an opportunity for growth without overshadowing all the tremendous good and positive momentum that we've been a part of.

Because we know that becoming a leading student success institution isn't a one-and-done effort.

It's an ongoing process of constant reflection, refinement and improvement.

We ask questions, we look for solutions, we work together.

And in doing so, we create meaningful change.

Because that's who we are.

That's what the Power of US is all about.

And that's the triumph of our tremendous CSUSM spirit.

Speaking of triumph, I want to take a moment to really highlight what an amazing year our student-athletes have had!

After an 18-month pause in competition during the height of the pandemic, our teams have roared back with the best collective performance in campus history.

Softball and women's basketball won regular-season titles.

Women's golf and men's basketball each won their tournament championships.

And our Cougars finished second in the standings in our conference.

Putting the "scholar" in "scholar-athlete" they did this with a cumulative GPA of 3.3, with 54 recording a perfect 4.0.

Here's another triumph of our CSUSM spirit:

Since the start of the pandemic, we've raised over \$10 million and counting – and six of that just in the last fiscal year alone.

If that isn't a clear message of public confidence in our university, I don't know what is!

That includes a record-breaking Giving Day where we raised nearly half-a-million dollars in just

24 hours for a variety of on-campus initiatives.

And this spring, we announced a signature \$1 million investment from the Chair of our Foundation Board, Steve Wagner and his wife, Laura, to establish The Stone Brewing Fund for Social Mobility.

This is so exciting because it really builds on all that we have been engaged in and are striving for via our strategic plan.

Another amazing feat: Over the last fiscal year, our campus received nearly 60 research awards totaling approximately \$14 million.

You know, whenever I try to take in the full breadth of what happens here – in our labs, clinics, classrooms, and communities – I am exhilarated but also humbled.

Humbled because to be a president of a university is to realize how little you know!

Every day, our students, faculty and staff are addressing social issues, contributing to the expansion of knowledge, and improving lives beyond the bounds of our campus.

Let me give you a few examples:

- Dr. Kimberley Pulvers and Dr. Richard Armenta recently received a \$1.2 million grant to implement a new Smoke and Vape Free Scholar Initiative Program.



- Dr. Christina Holub received National Institutes of Health funding for a project aimed at reducing health disparities among Latinx, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders.
- And Dr. Gerardo Dominguez will be receiving \$1.2 million from NASA to observe samples from an asteroid, leading to a stronger understanding of planetary surfaces.
- The scholarship and creative activities of our faculty is truly raising the profile of our institution, powering knowledge creation and the public good.
- Allow me to share a few more examples:
- Misael Diaz in visual and performing arts was recently named a winner of the prestigious 2022 San Diego Art Prize Award as part of a collaborative project called Cog-nate Collective.
- Dr. Matt Atherton and Dr. Sheri-Lynn Kurisu in sociology, along with librarian Allison Carr, appeared on a Comic-Con panel that discussed crime fighting through a lens of superheroes and popular culture.
- Dr. Gloria Pindi in communication was accepted into the prestigious Leadership and Mentoring Institute, sponsored by the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education.
- Dr. Elinne Becket in biological sciences received the Catalyst Award by Biocom California.
- Dr. Diego Sustaita, also in biological sciences, was recognized by the National Science Foundation, with the Early Career Development award.
- Dr. Vassilis Dalakas was honored with the Outstanding Marketing Educator Award by the Marketing Management Association.
- And Dr. Marisol Clark-Ibanez was our campus' CSU Wang Award nominee in recognition of her work with colleagues across campus to find novel solutions to social problems with an equity lens.

How about a round of applause for these accomplishments – and the many, many more that happen across our campus every day!

As we reflect on the past year and celebrate all our achievements – I know the ever-present and most urgent question is, “what’s next?”

In this powerful moment, building on the momentum of all these triumphs, our strategic plan is the framework for our answer.

In our new plan we talk about intellectual engagement as a means of empowering our students to find critical ways to make meaning of their lives and the complex ever-changing world around them.

And we talk about how important it is that they approach challenges with curiosity, open to the possibility of developing lifelong passions.

When I think about that – I think about all the ways our faculty and staff are already engaging our students in imagining a better shared future.

And not just imagining it, but already contributing to it.

For example:

- Two weeks ago, when I went on my annual visit to the Summer Scholars labs, I learned that the team of students working on alopecia areata just made a major research breakthrough! Together they identified a new gene involved in the disease and are now writing a manuscript to report these exciting results!

Another really great example of learning by doing is in COBA:

- The Cougar Fund is a student-run investment fund with \$280,000 in assets under management by and for students. Not only have our Cougar Fund students made sustainable investments a priority, but an important part of their mission is generating funds for student scholarships and programs.

And yet another example:

- Arts, Media and Design student Salma Rodriguez recently won three student Emmy Awards for a class video project titled “Border Line Fears” – highlighting the personal stories of those who have immigrated from Mexico to the U.S.

We are a national model of how to provide students with hands-on, real-world and individualized learning opportunities.

This isn’t just good for our students, it’s good for our region, and it’s good for our world.

Let me give you just a taste of exactly what I mean.

Last spring a COBA Senior Experience team partnered with Dean Jennifer Ostergren and our College of Education, Health & Human Services to understand the impact of hands-on learning in the college.

What was discovered was incredible. Through community service, internships, and clinical practicums, our CEHHS students contribute:

- Over \$17 million.
- Over 650,000 hours.
- In 550 partner locations annually in free clinical, education, health and wellness services across our region and state.

I also want to take a moment to highlight the work of Rochelle Smarr, director of Service Learning and Civic Engagement, who recently was honored with the Richard E. Cone Award for Emerging Leaders in Community Engagement.

In March, I had the honor of attending the Cesar Chavez Day of Service that Rochelle organized.

After two years of virtual days of service, it was an outstanding return to have over 200 students, faculty and staff volunteering in service to our region.

Another amazing example of the Power of Us.

As we work to be agents of change in an unjust world, I am continually inspired by how you are educating our students with DEI and equity-mindedness at the forefront.

Recently, our faculty added our ethnic studies requirement into our curriculum.

And new programs coming this fall include linguistics, a program that will help our students understand – amongst other things – how language is used in the construction of social identities as well as the role language plays in the promotion of different ideologies – some of which perpetuate bias, prejudice and inequality.

We're also responding to regional needs.

For example, at CSUSM Temecula, we're looking at expanding engineering and early childhood education to complement the programs in business and nursing that currently exist and are in high demand right now.

And in partnership with our local community colleges, we are preparing to launch a 2+2 program that will allow students to transfer into an online bachelor's in cybersecurity.

And, by the way, our cybersecurity students recently participated in the National Cyber League and placed in the top 20 out of 500 teams.

And – between you and me – they were the first in San Diego [a certain local UC was 97th].

For our student veterans, we are working with donors to fund a new director of military relations,

and thanks to the efforts of Dr. Patricia Prado-Olmos and VP Jessica Berger, a new military advisory committee will help guide our efforts in serving our military-affiliated students and family members moving forward.

This is so important given the region we serve.

As we think about student success, DEI, and meeting our region's workforce needs, an important part of our work will be to look at what programs and in what modalities come next via an academic plan.

Provost Kemnitz will be kicking off this effort in partnership with our deans and faculty this fall.

Our academic plan will dovetail with other strategic planning next steps, including a strategic enrollment plan that embodies our values and goals in how we provide educational access to our students, and a campus master plan that will provide the framework for future growth and development of capital improvements on our campus responsive to current and future needs.

Across all these plans – academic, enrollment, and facilities – there will be many opportunities to be involved, provide input and be a part of imagining the Cal State San Marcos of now and in the future!

More information will be shared soon on next steps.

In the near term, as we think about capital projects, our next academic building is coming to life – an Integrated Science and Engineering Building.

And it won't be just a building – it will be a gateway to further empowering student potential and diversifying the future of science and engineering in our region.

For example, we are already partnering to bring life science and biotech companies to campus.

Last year a cancer diagnostics start-up rented bench space in our EL building and then used that as a lily pad to jump into a new lab of their own.

With our new IS&E building, we will be able to take industry, faculty, student and alumni partnerships to an entirely different level.

This is especially exciting given that the San Diego life science and bio tech industries have already established North County as the next frontier.

The great news is that our building has moved up to No. 3 on the CSU priority list for state funding, placing us as the No. 1 academic building on the list – and our design process was funded by the CSU.

Vice President of Advancement Jessica Berger, Provost Kemnitz, Dean Jackie Trischman and many faculty and student partners are working with me to fundraise and friendraise in support of this building.

This isn't just good for CSTEM – it will be transformational for our entire campus, allowing us to accommodate and engage more students across disciplines and backgrounds which is, in the end, what it's all about.

Over the last three years, even with the economic setbacks of the pandemic, our region has seen tremendous growth.

I've watched from my office as the new Kaiser Hospital sprung up.

And no matter where you drive in San Marcos or along the 78 corridor, there is construction happening everywhere.

Recently, our regional EDC shared that if North County were its own county in California, it would be the ninth largest.

And if it were its own state, it would be larger than eight others in our country, both by population and employment.

The arc of growth we are seeing is unprecedented, and what's exciting is how we are truly at the center of it!

And we get to contribute and inclusively shape it with our graduates taking their place as future leaders and changemakers.

As we plan for future on-campus facilities and spaces, we are excited to creatively partner with the North City developers on new housing and dining facilities just off-campus.

Tomorrow is move-in day for about 300 new residents at North Commons – an affiliated partnership.

And our affordable housing proposal to the governor – which also comes with a dining component – was recently funded to the tune of \$90 million, the second highest in the CSU.

It's quite a feat that we were able to submit such a competitive proposal – Student Affairs, Planning Design and Construction, and the CSUSM Corporation came together to make it happen.

Preliminary timelines call for shovels in the ground as early as December 2023, bringing our total residential population to about 2,500 students.

Most importantly, given the rising cost of living, this project will provide affordable housing options to our future students who need it the most.

Together, we are creating an engaged campus.

We are making CSUSM the destination and first choice of first-generation and the next generation of students.

Together, we are building a university that is a national leader in accessibility, graduation and lifelong success.

As I think about the academic year unfolding before us and the thousands of students who are preparing for their first day on campus, I'm excited for the promise and potential ahead.

I'm reminded of the conversations we had in the early stages of our strategic planning process – conversations about defining student success and what it means to be a student-ready university.

So many of you shared that for us, it's not just about accepting and graduating students, it's about what they do with their lives after they graduate:

- How they lead.
- What new ideas they contribute.
- And how they give back and lead as examples for others to follow.

And I'm reminded at every turn, that our students and alumni are the change we need to see in the world.

This is the message I plan to deliver to all incoming first-year and transfer students this Sunday at our second annual New Student and Families Convocation.

If you can attend, I would love to have you there.

Because the event isn't only about welcoming our incoming class to their new home, it's also about reminding them that they aren't here alone.

At Student Convocation, one of the most special moments is during the presentation of the CSUSM challenge coin.

A coin like this – a visual representation of each student's goal to earn their degree.

And we ask our students' loved ones – their parents, their spouse, their friends – to offer them the coin while sharing their hopes and dreams for them.

I've been to many Student Convocations in my career, and that moment last year was one of the most meaningful I have ever seen.

As our convocation concludes and the academic year begins, I want to share MY hopes and dreams for you – and us – this year.

My first hope for us is continued progress and collaboration in achieving our mission of student success.

Cal State San Marcos is not just a university, we are an elevator of social mobility, an engine of inclusive economic growth, a driver of social justice and social change.

Not many universities can say that.

My second hope is for us to continue to be brought together through our shared passions and vision of excellence, unleashing the full Power of US, helping our region and our world know just how transformative and life changing we are.

And my final hope for you, is that your own CSUSM journey this year will be fulfilling, personally and professionally.

And that you know how valued and appreciated you are, not only by me, but by our students, their families, and our region.

You have helped us through the challenges of these past few years – with your expertise, your determination, and your great expectations for what we can accomplish together.

You are supporting our students and their hopes and dreams for the future, removing barriers, eliminating opportunity gaps and caring for them every step of the way.

You are trailblazing a path in this new day, building on the work already completed and taking it to new heights together.

So, this year, let's continue to model for our world a university boldly investing in the individual potential of each student, transformed by the power of intellectual rigor and critical thinking, ready to tackle the challenges of our world while embracing the promise of change.

There is no other university like CSUSM.

This is our time.

We were made for this!

Together, we are the future of where higher education is going.

And I couldn't be prouder or more thankful to be doing this work with you.

Thank you!

Have a wonderful year!