

**Convocation 2023**  
**President Ellen Neufeldt's Remarks as prepared**

Good morning!

Thank you, Carl!

And thank you, Glen, for your thoughtful message.

I am so grateful for your leadership and look forward to working with you and the Senate in the year to come.

Ernest, it has been a pleasure getting to know you these last three years.

In the back of the room, I also want to acknowledge our union representatives who are such an important part of collective bargaining and are representing the voices of their membership. We are glad you are here.

Whether you are joining us online or are right here in person – welcome to Employee Convocation 2023!

Today, we're not simply kicking off a new year, we're building on the momentum we've set in motion with the launch of our strategic plan: the Power of CSUSM and the Power of Us.

As president, I get to see the big picture of how all your individual work and contributions come together to enhance our university.

It's a privilege to be able to report today on some of the highlights of your good work.

Last August, when I shared our strategic plan's vision to be a top university for social mobility, none of us could have known that CollegeNet would rank us #1 in the nation just a few short months later!

It was a wonderful surprise and speaks to who we are as a university – our unwavering focus on our students and the message we strive to send to each one:

That their potential knows no bounds -

And their journey with us is not just about education, but about empowerment, opportunity and realizing their dreams.

And while we don't do it for the accolades, the Social Mobility Index is a reaffirmation of the meaningful impact that each one of you has made in shaping CSUSM's identity – a university committed to leading the change in social mobility and accessibility in higher education.

Given the national conversation right now on higher ed and the significant headwinds that we collectively face, I'm proud to be the president of this university – defying expectations, rewriting narratives and putting student success first in all that we do.

Let me share with you what I mean.

Just a few weeks ago, in July, I had the opportunity to attend a Biden/Harris Administration National Summit on Higher Education in Washington D.C. at the Department of Education.

The event brought together higher education leaders from across our country, and it was such an honor for me to be there representing not only CSUSM but the CSU.

Discussions centered on how higher education, collectively, could blaze a path forward for diversity and equity in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's ruling against affirmative action.

In California, affirmative action has been prohibited at public colleges and universities since 1996.

But, to quote Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, this ruling is a “turning point in higher education” for our nation.

At the same time, and even as deeply disappointing as it is to see affirmative action end, we know the policy was never enough on its own.

For too long, higher education has perpetuated inequality rather than addressed it or improved it.

Rankings, the media and public policy have really only worsened this issue.

Too often, the regional public universities are left out of the conversation, even though we are the ones who have – for decades – been paving the way.

For 34 years, we at CSUSM have stood as a beacon of opportunity, fostering success within our region and beyond.

Our success measured by our 67,000 proud alumni – 8 in 10 remaining in our region to live, work and give back.

We haven't always been perfect – and we know that DEI will always be a journey and not a destination – but in countless ways the privates and ivies can learn a lot about equity in education from us.

Because it's the institutions like ours that are opening our doors wide to students of all backgrounds and supporting them to graduation day and beyond.

When I was in D.C., I had a chance to share your great work and all the ways that we are innovatively breaking the mold, dismantling barriers and standing as a model for where higher ed needs to go next in terms of access, affordability and student success.

For example, we signed five new agreements with local school districts in March, bringing our total number of Alliance MOUs to over 15. These partnerships unlock educational access for hundreds of thousands of K-12 students, and it's our goal to extend the Alliance to every school district in our region, including Imperial County – and that is creating pathways to social mobility.

Tackling costs head on, our library's affordable textbook campaign supported 1,600 courses last year, saving students thousands of dollars in course materials. Affordability is a key component to success – and that's a pathway to social mobility.

A hallmark of the CSUSM experience – faculty mentorship and applied undergraduate learning – shone through our service learning program. With 150 community partners and 2,000 students engaged. Together, we are ensuring our students are graduating future-ready – and that is social mobility.

While in D.C., what was so amazing to me was that our reputation and work together was already known to many.

When I met Carrie Billy, the president & CEO of American Indian Higher Ed Consortium, she spoke so highly of Dr. Joely Proudfit, chair of our American Indian studies department and director of our one-of-a-kind California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center.

I also had the pleasure of meeting Deputy Secretary Cindy Marten and she let me know how much she admired the San Marcos Writing Project and the efforts of Dr. Laurie Stowell and the School of Ed to provide teacher professional development.

And I loved being able to talk about our new strategic plan and our focus on serving the students of our region – providing opportunities for social mobility, not only as a moral and ethical imperative, but an economic imperative for our region, our state and our nation.

And this imperative is more important than ever.

Someone who knows this better than most is Dr. Millie García, who was announced as CSU Chancellor-select at the July Board of Trustees meeting.

Dr. García is the current president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, previously serving as the president of CSU Dominguez Hills and Fullerton.

On Oct. 1 she will become the first-ever Latina CSU chancellor.

Dr. García talks about the significance of educating “the new majority” in higher education and the role of AASCU institutions – such as Cal State San Marcos – to educate the growing share of low-income, first-generation and students of color to prepare them for rewarding and well-paying careers.

We are already leading in this new era of education...that’s why we’re #1 in social mobility, which we’ve defined, via our strategic plan, as how our students transcend barriers faced by earlier generations, not only unlocking their potential for lifelong success but empowering them to be changemakers and innovative problem solvers for the future.

I want to thank you for how you work every day to make CSUSM a better place, with the empathy, resilience and ability to lead from where you are.

Like Jayce Yardley, our lead maintenance mechanic, who injects dedication into every task his team undertakes – from a simple fix to a complex building project. His contributions to creating a safe and welcoming environment directly support student success.

And Tina Querido in events & conference services, manages the puzzle of scheduling 10,000 events on campus, fueling her work with a “let’s get it done” mentality. This isn’t just about event logistics, it’s about fostering an environment where students engage, learn and connect – and that’s contributing directly to student success.

Then there’s Jeremy Williamson, director of facilities and operations in housing, who probably isn’t in this room today because he and so many others are supporting move-in at The QUAD.

As we’ve navigated the intricate landscape of increased demand for on-campus living, he has risen to the occasion with unwavering leadership, notably going the extra mile by meeting personally with families and students to support their smooth transition to campus.

His spirit exemplifies the entire housing team who form the bedrock of our student’s on-campus living experience.

These are just three examples that offer a glimpse into the collective tapestry that makes CSUSM so special.

They remind us that behind every student success story, there’s a community of dedicated individuals working to make it happen.

And that includes each and every one of you here today and watching online.

From day one of my journey here, I've been profoundly moved by your unwavering dedication to our students and their achievements.

This very spirit and ethos have been the driving force behind the multitude of remarkable accomplishments we witnessed this past year. However, our work together hasn't been without its challenges, bringing forward opportunities to reflect on how we can elevate and refine our culture, our climate and our outcomes in a post pandemic world moved by strong currents of change.

Our state, our country and our world are grappling with so much right now:

- A changing labor market;
- the urgency of climate change;
- the duality of technological opportunities and threats;
- and a complex landscape of mental health and wellness – just to name a few!

When we step back and consider these forces, it's no wonder that our campus also finds itself in the midst of a transformative period; and we are rightfully asking ourselves significant and challenging questions.

Questions like: What must evolve? What do we need to change? How can we not only lead but thrive in the next 30 years to come?

And to add a little bit of complexity to our work, this year we don't yet have all the information we need to finalize our budget.

What does that mean?

While we are grateful to the governor for fully funding the compact with the CSU (which help us meet increased costs of keeping the power on and our doors open) and we've made great progress in enrollment (rebounding from last year although not quite where we were pre-pandemic),

there are still several unknowns, including the outcome of negotiations between our unions and the Chancellor's Office - and I fully respect and support that process.

So, we are going to take a slow yet proactive approach to this budget year and hold some dollars back centrally so that we are prepared to meet any increased expenses that may come our way.

You might be wondering, well, what does that all mean?

VP Leon Wyden will be hosting a budget forum in September to share more details.

In the meantime, the important thing I want you to know is that our budget priorities continue to be rooted in our strategic plan with a focus on:

- our people,
- our long-term sustainability as an institution,
- and how we continue to support our mission of student success.

And when we think about rising to meet challenges and moving our mission forward, I want to thank all of those who have been engaged in important taskforces and workgroups for the betterment of our university.

### *Timely Incident Response Task Force*

In the last year alone, we have made progress with:

- Our Timely Incident Response Task Force;
- Our Policy Equity Review Committee; and
- Our DEI Inventory Project.

All three of these initiatives – which you can read more about on the Office of the President website – have been about forging systemic change and integrating the fundamental principles of inclusive excellence into our work moving forward.

In addition to these activities, an area that has required much important discussion, review and action is our Title IX and DHR processes.

Let me remind you of the journey traveled thus far:

A campus sexual harassment taskforce finalized their recommendations last fall.

An independent firm, TNG, then delved into our Title IX operations at my request, wrapping up their work in January.

And in July, the CSU released the full report of the systemwide Cozen O'Connor Title IX/DHR assessment.

All three of these reports are readily accessible on our Title IX website.

And with these in hand, an implementation team has been established, composed of student, faculty and staff representatives, actively translating the recommendations into actions.

We look forward to sharing updates on our progress at a campus-wide forum this fall.

One resounding message we've heard has been about the importance of fostering an environment where Title IX is synonymous with inclusivity for all - students and employees alike.

To achieve this, the Title IX/DHR office will have cross-divisional reporting lines to student affairs, academic affairs, and the office of human resources.

Early in my higher ed career, I used to be the Title IX function, before it was even called Title IX.

So, I personally know how complex this work is as well as how much it has evolved just in the last two decades.

We are so fortunate to have deeply caring and knowledgeable Title IX professionals on our campus – and I am grateful for their ongoing efforts as we look ahead.

Something that the Cozen Report highlights – which doesn't always fall under Title IX or nondiscrimination policy– is what happens when individuals experience “concerning behavior” and bias.

I’m referring to behavior and conduct, whether intentional or unintentional, that erodes the foundation of inclusivity and diversity we strive to uphold.

These instances are becoming all too familiar in our society and right here on campus.

I’ve recently had heartfelt conversations with employees and students who’ve recounted painful experiences - and they’ve shared how isolating it can be, particularly when linked to identity.

And I must give voice to the often-unseen yet heavy burden that our faculty and staff of color experience when students turn to them for help and support through these incidents.

We are taking a step forward by hiring a dedicated bias response coordinator to work across campus to support individuals.

Yet, we must go further, and we will always be working together as a campus community to improve.

I know so many of our faculty have done great work in this area, and there are many ideas of how we can build on what so many have already done.

One of those ideas is how we partner with our faculty to focus on the climate in our classrooms.

I know this is a topic that our Academic Affairs leadership team is committed to, with the goal of creating an action plan specifically tailored to provide robust support to our students of color within the classroom setting.

And I know our faculty center has begun offering a range of resources aimed at promoting classroom equity and fostering inclusive classroom environments.

Looking ahead to October, we look forward to hosting a North County Higher Education Alliance faculty symposium that centers on the theme of “Building Community Through Culturally Validating Pedagogy.”

This symposium – which also serves the faculty of Palomar and Miracosta – will focus on innovative practices that affirm all students’ cultural strengths and recognizes and supports their intersectional identities in and out of the classroom.

This is too important – our community is looking to us to be the model for our region and our world.

We have the capacity and responsibility to move forward, and we must stand united in this.

Nurturing a culture of equity, respect, compassion and care is a responsibility that rests on each of us.

This is not about checking boxes and calling it a day.

What it is about is ensuring that however you identify, whomever you love and whatever your abilities, you are included and welcomed to thrive right here at CSUSM: in our classrooms, offices and workspaces, and shared governance areas.

We know that this work will continue to build and evolve.

At the same time, I’ve also heard that we need to do a better job of reporting out our work and progress.

Because to understand where we are going next, we need to understand what so many of you have been a part of.

To that end, I want to share a few examples of successful, incremental, yet important progress made possible by so many of you.

As many of you know, in spring 2022, we took a significant and intentional step forward by partnering with the Coalition on Black and African American Education, a collection of community-based, faith-based and civic organizations, including the North County Chapter of the NAACP.

I mentioned this partnership last year when we signed the MOU, and I mention it again because it’s important for you to know that it’s much more than a symbolic agreement.

Over the last year, our community partners have worked with us to identify action steps that will support Black student success and belonging.

Two recent outcomes include:



- our increased presence at Black community events across our region, with special thanks to Rosa Barr-Williams in EMS for her work to strengthen relationships with churches, civic organizations and families; and
- our deepened engagement with our K-12 community, exemplified by the upcoming Black Student Union Network Student Leadership Conference for high schoolers in October.

As we celebrate these efforts, I don't want to take away from the fact that we still have more to do to drive the change necessary, as the "CSU Black Student Success Report" – published in July – has pointed out.

I am grateful to all those who generously and courageously voice their experiences – across the diversity of identities - in service to creating a more thriving and welcoming campus for all.

I assure you that your voices are heard, and we will not stop driving this much needed change.

One generous voice is that of Robert Aiello-Hauser, director of our Pride Center, who has been so willing to help me learn and grow as a leader in striving to support our LGBTQ+ community.

Earlier this month, Robert and his husband hosted me at the Human Rights Campaign San Diego dinner, to assure that CSUSM is part of the growing regional and national movement to secure LGBTQ equality.

A tangible example of progress taking shape on campus with 15 gender-inclusive restrooms established in buildings across campus and at CSUSM at Temecula.

We will continue to add to these every year.

Thank you to associate Dean Char Booth – and so many others who – who put this important effort into motion as a part of our Trans & Gender Non-Conforming Taskforce recommendations.

As we continue this journey, we will persist in our efforts to ensure that every individual is afforded the dignity and respect they rightfully deserve.

This commitment extends to every facet of our campus community, including our Hispanic-Servingness.

As an HSI, we continue to define – and redefine – what it means to not only enroll but truly "serve" every student.

In support of this work, we recently received a CSU HSI Global Initiative grant to further our efforts toward receiving the Seal of *Excelencia*, a transformative framework that aligns data, practices and leadership to accelerate student success.

I want to thank Dr. Viridiana Diaz, VP of Student Affairs, for championing this effort along with the cross-divisional advisory and action teams moving the application forward.

Another exciting development is a new \$3-million-dollar grant from the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program at the U.S. Department of Ed.

This grant is designed to increase the enrollment, retention and graduation of Latinx students as well as all Pell-eligible students.

I also want to acknowledge the work of both our American Indian and APIDA Student Success work groups.

Over the past year, these two groups have engaged our community to develop actionable recommendations to better support belonging and academic success.

As a direct result, I'm pleased to share that we have hired our new APIDA and American Indian program coordinators – one for each center - who are overseeing student programming for the first time this fall!

The next phase (estimated for fall 2024) is opening two new student centers – an American Indian Student Center and an APIDA Student Center – right here in the USU!

To make room and allow for the reallocation of space for all our student centers, the dean of student's office will be strategically relocated to the first floor of the Administrative Building with other key student support services.

I'm looking forward to celebrating the ribbon cuttings for these spaces when complete.

I also want to highlight two major grants that take this work even broader to our region.

This summer, we learned that the California Health & Human Services Agency funded a \$600,000 dollar grant titled, “Unifying APIDA Communities Together / Stop the Hate.”

Led by Dr. Theresa Suarez, Dr. Christina Holub, Dr. Madeline Lee and Cheryl Landin, this project will drive outreach and implement community-centered approaches to address APIDA hate incidents.

The ultimate aim is to foster a more robust safety ecosystem for our region.

And our California Indian Culture & Sovereignty Center recently received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

PI Dr. Joely Proudfit will be working to understand the barriers and motivations – as well as the messages that will resonate - for American Indian/Alaska Native students in higher education.

These are just a few examples of how our campus is truly leading the way.

Recognizing the inseparable link between DEI efforts and both student success and sustainability, I want to take a moment to highlight the ongoing partnership between the Climate Change Faculty Working Group and our sustainability office to elevate climate action.

Last week, I had the honor of signing the “President’s Climate Leadership Commitment” during a tree planting event right here on our campus.

This commitment solidifies our dedication to achieving carbon neutrality and fostering the resilience of our community in the face of climate change.

My gratitude goes to all those who have deepened my understanding of this critical work, particularly sustainability manager Juliana Goodlaw-Morris ... and Dina Gilio-Whitaker from our American Indian studies department - a renowned expert on environmental justice and policy planning from an indigenous feminist lens.

Our campus is a hub of innovation in this area with so many faculty leading the way in climate change and sustainability research and scholarship, including:

Kit-Bacon Gressitt who integrates climate education into her women & gender studies courses.

William Byun in CoBA who brings his business knowledge on renewable energy and microgrids to the classroom.

Dr. Emmanuel Iyiegbuniwe from public health is exploring performance-based approaches and measurement strategies to support indoor air quality; and

Judit Hersko who works with scientists on visualizing climate change science through art and narrative.

And this November, our campus will join five other CSUs in receiving an AASCU “Excellence and Innovation Award” for sustainability.

This recognition stems from our participation in a pilot Faculty Learning Community on “Teaching Climate Change and Resilience,” where seven of our faculty explored ways to include sustainability and climate change in their curricula.

An outstanding example of how our faculty are inspiring future generations of climate champions who will advance environmental justice and create a greener, more sustainable world for us all.

This work aligns seamlessly in our new strategic plan, reflecting our commitment to student success and social mobility.

For us, it's not just about guiding our students to graduation day, it's about fostering their potential as innovators and change agents, preparing them to tackle and contribute to the challenges of our evolving world.

This doesn't start when they first enroll at CSUSM, it starts with proactive outreach to our K-12, community college and military partners, ensuring a seamless educational pathway.

Let me share a glimpse of this dedication through just a few examples:

- Thanks to the efforts of many, including a new Military Advisory Board, we will soon have a presence in the Education Center at Camp Pendleton, bringing courses to base.
- A new CoBA summer initiative offered week-long workshops to nearly 100 high school students centered on financial literacy and entrepreneurship in collaboration with the San Diego Chapter of Junior Achievement.
- A cross-divisional partnership between student affairs and academic affairs brought 1,000 ninth graders and 200 parents from high schools across Southern California to campus for the Puente Student Leadership Conference.
- And CSTEM offered students a four-week summer experience to introduce students to quantum mechanics and the emerging field of quantum information science and technology. What's so exciting is how our students are learning to leverage the unique properties of quantum mechanics to create more powerful and efficient microchips.

It's incredible to me that on Monday, we are poised to welcome our new and returning students to campus.

As I mentioned earlier, while our enrollment hasn't quite rebounded to what it was pre-pandemic, we saw strong growth in our enrollment following last year's post-pandemic decline.

So many people across our campus have put in so much work to make our enrollment happen from our orientation team to recruitment and outreach team to academic advising to student success coaching, financial aid, teams in our colleges and so many more.

Moving this work forward, we have teams working on the coordination and development of three very important plans, undergirding our institutional strategic plan.

The first is a strategic enrollment plan to create a roadmap for our student recruitment, retention and success.

The second, is our academic plan, being brought to life by the Long-Range Academic Master Plan Committee (also known as LAMP), co-chaired by Dr. Rika Yoshi and Vice Provost Mary Oling-Sisay.

To meet the evolving needs of our students and our region, LAMP is envisioning our future curriculum development and program expansion.

And a third plan under development will lead to our second and largest university fundraising campaign.

When complete, these three plans – along with a future facilities master plan - will be intricately woven together, each contributing to and reinforcing the others to ensure a unified and strategic path forward – doubling down on who we are and how we move forward.

Over the last 34 years, we have evolved from an innovative start-up into a beacon of learning and progress with so much momentum lifting our wings.

Momentum in the form of the most dollars raised in a single year in our history: over \$12 million.

And this is despite charitable giving being down across the nation by over 10%

Yet here, we saw a 23% increase in total donors and record-breaking fundraising events.

That's the Power of Us!

Our athletics teams are No. 1 in our conference, and we took home the CCAA Commissioner's Cup for the first time in June!

Our Cougar athletes brought home two conference championships – for men's and women's golf – and six more top-three finishes for men's and women's basketball, softball, men's cross country and men's and women's track and field.

Even better, a record 103 student athletes earned academic achievement awards from the D2 Athletics Directors Association – the highest in our conference!

Our students are clearly powerhouses in competition and in the classroom – and that's the Power of Us!

And we've also seen incredible momentum in the form of a record-breaking year for external grants!

This fiscal year, we were awarded a total of \$25 million, exceeding a previous high of \$18 million in 2018/19!

And what stands out to me about these grants is how so many of them center on student success and offering hands-on learning opportunities, such as:

- Dr. Diego Sustaita's NSF CAREER award, which integrates his research on the salt marsh harvest mouse into a new "Applied Animal Ecology" course with hands-on field research experience for the class.
- Dr. Denise Garcia and Dr. Ranjeeta Basu received an NIH grant that will lead to the design of mindfulness workshops for students applying to graduate school – an innovative partnership between our new center for contemplative practices and our center for training, research and educational excellence.
- And Dr. Rebecca Brooks in our school of education received a grant from the department of developmental services to forge a new and inclusive program called, "Aspiring Scholars" for students with intellectual disabilities seeking a college experience.

Not only this but our faculty and staff continue to receive awards and tremendous accolades.

Let me share a few highlights:

- Jason Magabo Perez, professor of ethnic studies, was awarded a \$50,000 poet laureate fellowship by the Academy of American Poets following his appointment as the City of San Diego's official poet laureate this January.
- Dr. Gloria Pindi, associate professor of communication, won a national award from the organization for the study of communication, language and gender for her published article in the field of feminist and gender studies.
- And this is a fun one: Dr. Elinne Becket, associate professor of biology and faculty director of innovation, received international science news coverage for the "saga of the blue soup" after she quite literally made a science project out of back-of-the-fridge beef soup that had turned blue.

I could go on – across every department and discipline where there is exciting work happening.

All of this work is incredibly inspiring – and what I love the most is how all of these projects connect to our bottom line of student success and social mobility.

This is so exciting because it's about driving forward in the future direction of our university, honing our identity and doubling down on the essence of who we are and who we aspire to become.

Against the backdrop of shifting student demographics, a post-pandemic workforce and economic dynamics, we will lead and be the beacon of higher education that others turn to.

With an emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration, an investment in foundational student learning experiences, and new facilities – from affordable student housing to a new integrated science and engineering building, to a new rec and wellness facility – we can, and we will meet our region’s and our world’s expectations for graduates equipped with the skills to work and lead.

So, if you are wondering, what’s my vision and what are we working toward let me be abundantly clear:

It’s not me setting the tone – it’s all of us, and our road map is our strategic plan.

Together we are:

- Educating and empowering the leaders and changemakers of tomorrow, instilling in them the tools they need to surmount the challenges ahead.
- Embracing the responsibility to create avenues of social mobility for the diverse and talented students and families of our region.
- And forging cutting-edge, innovative experiences and facilities that amplify our collective potential, providing a canvas for academic excellence, scholarship and innovation to flourish.

That is who we are and as we stand on the cusp of a new academic year this is the path we will continue to walk.

Thank you for the privilege of walking this path with all of you.

Here’s to a year of innovation, evolution and transformation.

Have a great year!