

**Convocation 2021  
(Remarks as prepared)**

Good morning, thank you Carl!

I can't believe this is already your second convocation...and my third!

It's good to be here as we open another academic year.

Some of you know that I adopted a pandemic dog last year named Bailey who disrupted more zoom meetings than I care to count.

So many of us are getting ready for the first day of school – and he was so excited that he put on his Cougar Blue bow tie gifted by our new VP of Advancement Jessica Berger.

And he's pictured here with his Cougar Blue bone from Academic Senate Chair Yvonne Nalani Meulemans!

Thank you for indulging me with that photo – I couldn't resist.

I really appreciated Yvonne's video remarks and the Senate's commitment to equity and their determination to tackle tough issues and move our campus forward.

And, Dylan, I just want to say thank you for all that you and the student leadership team have done to give voice to our students and support their success and wellness during this past year.

You are so right, it is that undying Cougar spirit that has carried us through.

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

I want to warmly welcome all our new staff, faculty and administrators.

And by the way, half of our new faculty are part of our inaugural diversity cluster hire program!

As we welcome everyone today, I also know that for those participating in the Early Exit Program – about 60 of you – this is your last Convocation.

Some of those retiring this year have served our campus for many years.

To all of you: Thank you.

We will continue to build on the tremendous legacy you are leaving here.

If any of you are in the audience today – I invite you to stand as you are able so that we can applaud you.

Vice President of Student Affairs Lorena Checa is also retiring in December.

Over the last 30 years, her contributions to our campus have been both deep and broad.

She has touched countless lives and has been an inspiration to so many, including me.

From the bottom of my heart – Lorena - thank you for your friendship, your counsel, and your leadership.

I decided to wear the same suit I wore two years ago at my first Convocation.

Whenever I wear this suit, it brings me back to that day – just a few months into my tenure.

What I remember was how I was brimming with pride to be part of this spectacular university.

On my listening and learning tour, I was amazed by how every person I spoke to was so mission driven, understanding the importance of their role and how it fit into the whole of supporting our students.

As we have traveled the journey of these last 24 months, we have faced headwinds that I could never have imagined.

This time has forever changed me, as it has changed all of us.

For me, I have gone from the wide-eyed hope of abstract possibilities to the true understanding of our collective grit as we have been stretched and stressed in our efforts to meet our institutional promise and mission.

Every day has brought shifting conditions that have impacted the way we work.

Something I know for sure: since March 2020, there has not been one among us who has not felt a sense of loss.

Some of us have lost loved ones – and my heart goes out to you...

This has been such a difficult time – even the way we grieve has been impacted.

I know, firsthand for me, to not be able to attend my aunt's funeral was so difficult – to not be able to be with family ... I know so many of you have your own stories.

I want you to know how much you amaze me - I feel so fortunate to work with all of you.

So, I want to pause here to say, thank you.

Thank you to all those who have been on the frontlines:

our facilities and custodial teams, health center and student life professionals, IT staff, UPD and all those who helped maintain vital infrastructure.

Thank you to all those who were a part of mobilizing the Vaccine Super Center – which administered over 81,000 vaccines – and our County testing center which to date has provided nearly 200,000 tests.

And thank you to all those who quickly adapted to delivering on our mission remotely – adjusting courses, teaching methods, and service delivery to accommodate the new virtual world we were thrust into.

When I look back on March 2020, I'm still amazed by all the ways we were able to pivot.

And this semester, not only did we meet our enrollment goals with over 16,000 students... but about 11,000 of them will be on campus to take at least one in-person course.

I know making ALL of this a reality was no small feat.

Nor were we perfect every step of the way.

But together we learned, we adjusted and we forged ahead on a path built on the Cougar spirit of care, collaboration and innovation.

Even as we dealt with all the complexities of COVID – you still continued to be amazingly productive in other ways.

To give you just a small sense of all that we did together, let me share a few highlights by the numbers.

- 3.37 – the average GPA of our student athletes. In fact, we led our conference in all CCAA academic awards!
- \$5 million – the fundraising goal our Advancement team exceeded this year, earning the 2020 CASE Educational Fundraising Award for Overall Improvement among Public Comprehensive Institutions.
- The top 5% – the percent of business schools internationally that have earned accreditation by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, which now includes COBA.
- And, No. 1 in the nation – the number that represents our facilities team for earning the APPA Award for Excellence in Facilities Management.
  - Let me take just one more moment to acknowledge the unsung heroes of facilities who have been on campus since COVID first rocked our worlds.
  - If we have any custodians, groundskeepers, energy management and utility services team members or trades staff in the audience, I'd love for you to stand as you are able so we can all give you a round of applause!

And just one more time, I want to thank all of you for what you've done – whether you have been on-campus or working remotely.

I just met with the Academic Senate Executive Committee yesterday and we discussed that progress where COVID-19 is concerned is a winding road.

As we start a new academic year, I know this continues to be a time of transition and changes upon changes.

I have no doubt – the next few months will be bumpy.

Please know that we continue to build support resources not only for our students but also for our faculty and staff, as part of our commitment to a Culture of Care.

With our new AVP of Human Resources Erika Gravett on board, we will be consulting with staff leaders about where we go next with our Staff Center, including finding it a physical space on campus.

Provost Kemnitz will be consulting with faculty on how we continue to grow our support for them.

But no one person or one office can sustain a Culture of Care on their own.

We need to do it together, each of us taking ownership for how we contribute and care for one another.

Sometimes, people ask me to define the Culture of Care.

For me, it's about treating everyone with dignity, knowing that on the other end of our practices, policies, communications, and transactions there is a real person.

It's also about how we offer each other support and resources during traumatic and difficult moments.

I would hate for anyone to think that our Culture of Care negates the fact that sometimes we will debate or disagree... or that I will sometimes make unpopular decisions.

What you can count on from me is that I will always listen and consult with the desire to understand different ideas, suggestions and viewpoints.

Even if you disagree with my leadership decisions, I will strive to give you the context for why I made the choices I did.

And we're always going to take the time to engage in conversation and look at what we can do to bring our community together.

That's what we're going to do with our Craven Taskforce, which is being seated with representation from our students, faculty, staff, alumni and external community.

With the guidance of the National Conflict Resolution Center – which specializes in mediating conversations –we're going to engage in a thoughtful process of dialogue.

Thank you to Dr. Patricia Prado-Olmos, Chief Community Engagement Officer and Dr. Elizabeth Matthews, Interim Dean of CHABSS, for co-chairing this effort.

This has been a year when we haven't shied away from hard conversations...and I know how weary you may be because the pandemic hasn't been the only battle we've been fighting.

Some recently shared with me their dismay about how these last 24 months have peeled back layers on our institution, revealing blemishes incongruent with our shared values.

Certain individuals have been a part of wrongdoing that have not lived up to our mission – and it's caused us to take a step back and reevaluate what that means.

And when I talk about this, I'm talking about the fiscal stewardship fiasco where an employee committed fraud and overspent taxpayer money.

And I'm talking about the recent Title IX investigation into allegations of sexual harassment by an employee.

When I thought about talking about this today – I had a hard time finding the words for the emotion and anger these situations elicit in me.

These events – along with the complications of COVID-19 - have left me awake at night, contemplating the kind of leader I want and need to be.

I wish I could promise that we would never see harmful and destructive behavior at our university, or that individuals would never overstep their authority, abuse power or steal resources.

I am very frustrated to say I can't promise you that.

But here's what I will promise you:

I will never take these issues lightly and we will use these flash points as opportunities to improve, to grow and to be better.

Because, at times like these, we must hold on tighter to our values as a university and act decisively.

That's what we did with fiscal stewardship.

In fall 2019 I promised that we would fully address the issues while being transparent in our efforts to grow and improve.

Thanks to the work of so many – and even with the complications of the pandemic – we’ve followed through with implementing appropriate checks and guardrails to protect our university moving forward.

We also engaged an independent accounting and auditing firm to review our work.

All of the actions we’ve taken and the independent report are posted on our fiscal stewardship website.

As we come back this year, you can feel confident that the infrastructure and processes around how we spend our precious dollars are strong as we continue to improve and implement the recommendations we’ve been given.

Thanks to the hard work of so many including AVP for Compliance and Operations Brittani Brown and her team, we are now a model in our system.

And I couldn’t be more pleased to hand off the work to our new Vice President of FAS Leon Wyden who will continue to lead this charge.

Fiscal stewardship was a painful moment of growth for our campus – one that I never would have asked for... but it has led to real, meaningful, and ongoing change.

And now we are called upon to lead in another, even deeper way to create systemic changes for our campus related to sexual harassment and Title IX.

I know we all feel deeply for our students in this situation.

Navigating Title IX is clearly a cumbersome and convoluted process.

I have no doubt that good, caring people on our campus who have dedicated their professional lives to this work followed the policies laid out for them but that doesn’t take away from the fact that for victims and survivors, it’s a difficult road to walk.

Our Title IX professionals agree that it is time to step back and look at how we steward the process moving forward – and we’re bringing in an external reviewer to help them do just that.

We are also creating a new position in the Office of Inclusive Excellence that will help and support anyone reporting incidents of harassment, hate or bias.

Additionally, our Title IX Office joined a national cohort of universities participating in a collective called “Culture of Respect,” focused on building capacity to end sexual violence through ongoing, expansive organizational change and assessment.

And, we are launching a taskforce centered on accountability, safety, prevention and education.

I want to thank:

- Dr. Ranjeeta Basu,
- student Elia Lorang-Azurdia
- Dr. Yvonne Nalani Mule-mans,
- Dr. Raj Pillai,
- Dr. Lori Walkington,
- Title IX Coordinator Dr. Bridget Blanshan and
- Dean of Students Jason Schreiber

who came together over the summer to provide input on the taskforce charge and membership.

This is just the beginning of this phase of the movement – and I am committed to leading it.

Many of you have expressed frustration, anger and disappointment that sexual harassment could have taken place on this campus.

I'm angry too.

I want you to know that I hear you . . . and I'm asking for us to join together to create change.

Because it's going to take all of us.

What I love so much about our campus is how we stand tall and face our issues and challenges head on.

That's what we did with fiscal stewardship... and that is what we are determined to do around sexual harassment.

As a campus community, we face many pervasive and big issues.

As your president, you can count on the fact that I'll always own our difficult moments and mobilize to do better and lead the way as transparently as possible.

Quite frankly, we will always have flaws – that's just the humanity of it.

But it's about acknowledging those flaws and then doing something in these tough moments that defines who we are and where we go next.

I will own, with all that we've been dealing with, there have been many days where I felt dispirited and discouraged.

Maybe you've had days like that too!

But it always seems like when I'm at my lowest – a former student will reach out to share their accomplishments... or a faculty member will send me some news about their fantastic research... or a staff member will give me a progress update on their work – and I will feel buoyed and renewed.

One example of this was when photos of Commencement unexpectedly popped up on my iPhone – it gave me such a rush of gratitude.

Commencement is always my favorite time of year.

This May, it was in a league all its own.

To be on campus again and see some of you in 3-D after so many long months – it was absolutely life affirming.

And to celebrate the achievements of our students with their proud families was nothing short of magical.

I even got proposed to on stage by one of the graduates!

I couldn't point my fiancé out in a crowd, but my friends in the back was able to track down footage of the moment!

Thank you to the Commencement Planning Committee and all the amazing volunteers who helped ensure that the celebrations – including our second annual Graduates on Parade event - would not only be special but safe.

I thought about Commencement again the other day when the draft strategic plan was presented at University Cabinet.

As a reminder, Cabinet is a consultative advisory group with representation from students, staff, tenure-track faculty, lecturer faculty, an associate dean and dean. level representation.

It was gratifying to read the document and see all your ideas coalesce around our people, our culture of care and our commitment to supporting first-generation and underserved students, meeting them where they are.

You also articulated that success for our students doesn't just mean that they graduate but that they also continue to give back:

- going out into our world to solve our most pressing post-COVID challenges;
- engaging in their communities as socially just changemakers;
- and creating ripple effects across families and generations.

What I saw you describing was our outstanding leadership in social mobility for our students.

Looking through the notes, it was evident to me that we are poised for national leadership in this area, building on our 30-year legacy by redefining where higher education should be going – especially in a post-pandemic world.

I want to thank the steering committee – chaired by Provost Kemnitz and Dr. Ranjeeta Basu – for all they have done to shepherd the process and ensure so many campus voices were heard along the way.

You will get a chance to see the draft plan in the coming days, and there are two more forums to provide input in September.

Please remember that you can also send your feedback via email and the Strategic Planning website.

When I read the draft, what came to mind was how we are breaking the mold of higher education – not just trying to balance the playing field but building a new one that supports our students every step of the way.

Currently we rank number 28 nationally out of almost 1,500 colleges and universities in the Social Mobility Index.

We jumped eight spots in the last year alone.

I want to see us break the top 10 in the next three years.

It's a lofty goal – but it's one I know we can achieve!

Already, we have shown that we can eliminate the equity gap in graduation rates for our low income and underrepresented minority students – the first and only CSU to do so!

And for our Pell Grant recipients, we are just 1% away from closing the gap.

Here at CSUSM, we won't turn our backs on any members of our community.

No other university in our region has the reach that we do.

None serve the students we do.

And, frankly, we are the only university serves students in the WAY we do – through our faculty and staff's unique approach to intellectual engagement and hands on learning.

Two years ago, on my first day on campus, I was invited to the Summer Scholars laboratories.

This summer, it was wonderful to go back and visit again, thanks to the invitation from Dr. Julie Jameson, Dr. Robert Iafe, and Dr. Dennis Kolosov.

One of my student tour guides that day was Apple, a senior majoring in biological sciences.

As part of the program, Apple worked with her mentors to better understand alopecia areata, an autoimmune disease with no cure.

I met Apple's aunts who were so proud of their niece and the fact that she – along with eleven other students – contributed to a manuscript headed toward publication.

Apple's aunts were there in place of her dad – who lives in the Philippines – and her mom, who battled cancer and is the inspiration for Apple's dream to one day find a cure.

I am so impressed by Apple's CSUSM journey – as a first-generation scholar, she epitomizes why we do what we do.

Summer Scholars is one of the great examples of how we engage our students in interdisciplinary hands-on projects.

Let me also tell you about:

- Dr. Blake Beecher,
- Dr. Jimmy Young and
- Jeannine Guarino, MSW

from the Department of Social Work who included several student research assistants in a study, funded by the Lucky Duck Foundation.

The study sought to better understand the perceptions of mental health and substance abuse by individuals experiencing homelessness.

Britney Carbajal, who just graduated with her master's, used the research as part of her thesis and is on her way to a journal article for publication.

And professor Lucy HG Solomon from the School of Arts involved Kodie Gerritsen, a double major in physics and visual and performing arts, on digital projects.

They combined both art and science, including an interactive art piece that uses living organisms and artificial intelligence to send tweets.

These student and faculty stories – and the countless others I couldn't mention today – illustrate your leadership in providing hands-on, real-life learning experiences that launch our students into their careers OR into graduate school, prepared and ready to lead.

Moving forward, we want to provide opportunities for support and growth for all the wonderful, engaged learning programs that you've created, so that every student can have this type of learning experience.

One of the budget commitments the Provost and I have made for this fiscal year is to add over 18 new tenure-track faculty lines, bringing even more diverse talent and expertise to our campus in support of our students and their engagement.

Another thing that stood out to me when I was reading the draft strategic plan was how we have embraced an innovation ecosystem that not only ignites curiosity but mobilizes ideas.

I was so impressed to learn that our faculty and staff received \$15 million in external grant funding.

Let me tell you about a few of our recent awards:

- Management faculty Dr. Paola Ometto teamed up with Dr. Carly Bertrand from human development to write a grant to study minority entrepreneurs – a first for COBA from the National Science Foundation!
- From the Department of Kinesiology, Dr. Deanna Schmidt received \$430,000 to look at the effect of heavy backpack load on the upper limbs and hands of first responders, military and law enforcement.
- Her work could potentially lead to injury prevention and improved hand function.
- And our Veterans Center received a \$6 million award for the Veterans to Energy Careers program, which each year supports 50 student veterans in year-round internships that involve everything from research to new product development.

And our Chemistry Department recently signed on to the Green Chemistry Commitment, making Cal State San Marcos the first CSU – and 1 of only 80 institutions around the world – to make our labs safer and environmentally friendly.

And our Innovation Hub – which has been operating virtually since it was founded in March 2020 – just received a \$250,000 grant from the Conrad Prebys Foundation to help fund the build out of its physical space, which will open this fall.

Another exciting development is a new pilot program in which industry partners lease campus lab space with the goal of our students and faculty having an opportunity to participate.

Volition America, a cancer diagnostics company, is our inaugural partner and we are exploring several more.

Moving forward, the Provost's Office will be welcoming applications for five Faculty Innovation Fellows this fall to help further build and develop innovation and entrepreneurial opportunities while serving as innovation ambassadors.

When I think about our innovation ecosystem, what sets us apart from other institutions in this area will be how innovation comes together at the intersection of social change.

Not only are we introducing our students to emerging fields, but we are empowering them to be leaders of tomorrow.

With all this engaged scholarship and innovation, there's so much to celebrate.

And because we want every single student to have these types of opportunities, we need to continue to knock down the barriers that stand in their way.

A few weeks ago, we applied COVID Relief Funds to pay off past-due student account balances.

Within a few days we heard from several students about how this changed the trajectory of their academic journey.

One student shared that in the last year, she lost her boyfriend and her dad – both to COVID.

She had been struggling to pay her bill, and having her debt erased was such a relief, allowing her to continue her studies.

I want to thank everyone in Student Financial Services who made this possible.

In the area of technology, we jumped at the chance to participate in the Chancellor's Office new C-SUCCESS program, which aims to close the tech equity gap.

On Tuesday I got to join our IITS staff and many volunteers, including Interim COBA Dean Ben Cherry and Dr. Jocelyn Ahlers, in the distribution of new iPads for about 1,700 new students.

I want to thank IITS for all their hard work.

Another significant way we are reducing barriers is through our Student Success Coaching Program, which seeks to deepen student connections and offer support.

We mobilized this program quickly during COVID to complement our first-year student experience, thanks to all those who were willing to take on different roles to make it possible.

This program is already receiving national acclaim - we recently learned it was selected as the 2021 AASCU Excellence and Innovation Award winner!

I want to applaud Dr. Valita Jones and her entire team for this amazing accomplishment.

When I think about the coaching program, I think about how important it is to create that sense of connection with our students.

In this time of COVID, we know that social isolation has led to a rise in depression and anxiety nationally, particularly amongst college students.

Last year, our Cougar Care Network received over 2,500 referrals – an increase of 62% in just two years.

In response to growing demand, Student Health and Counseling Services is adding clinical case management as well as an embedded MSW internship program.

And we are adding a Basic Needs Coordinator to help connect students with on and off campus resources such as our Cougar Pantry, which is moving into a bigger space in University Commons this fall thanks to the amazing work of ASI.

Student Health and Counseling Services will also be partnering with UPD on the creation of a new on-campus psychiatric emergency response unit.

This is one of the outcomes from the recent Innovation in Policing Taskforce, co-chaired by Dr. Sharon Hamill, Dr. James Chun and Chief Lamine Secka.

By reallocating funds and with designated state dollars, we will be able to support specialized mental health care in emergency situations as well as provide additional mental health training across campus.

Thank you to all our mental health and public safety professionals for their partnership on this.

This is a new model in the CSU that will allow us to further our commitment to our values of racial and social justice, care, and human dignity.

We look forward to sharing more about this new initiative – as well as next steps for other taskforce recommendations in the weeks ahead.

Going back again to our strategic plan, it was deeply gratifying to see that there was such robust agreement that inclusive excellence needed to continue as one of our guiding core values, with goals built around how we nurture and sustain it.

The interconnected pandemics unmasked and amplified vast inequalities and injustices along economic, racial and ethnic lines.

But as a campus community committed to the values of student success and inclusive excellence, in our imperfect trajectory, we are working to create a new day.

I'm so pleased that Dr. Aswad Allen, our new chief diversity officer, has joined us in this work.

I also want to thank Dr. Ranjeeta Basu for serving in the interim role since last summer following her service as interim provost!

While I know she's very much looking forward to returning to the faculty...Ranjeeta, I can't promise I won't be calling on you again!

In the summer of 2020, I made several commitments to build on our work to systemically address racism and bias at CSUSM.

These commitments are outlined on our website and will continue to be updated.

Some examples include launching initiatives to support student success for our APIDA community.

A student experience taskforce is engaging our campus in dialogue, working toward recommendations for tailored APIDA student support and belonging, including a new student center.

In addition, a Black Student Success Initiative is focused on creating community on campus and off, with a strong academic focus.

And, reaching into our region, we are actively working to reengaging with Black community leaders to develop deeper, more authentic, and supportive relationships.

Last year OIE launched the Distinguished Lecture Series - the first one was centered on the Black Experience at CSUSM by Drs. Sharon Elise, Lori Walkington and Mohamed Abumaye on “The New Jim Crow in Academia”.

I’m very much looking forward to the next lecture in the series when Dr. Joely Proudfit will present her findings on the impact of COVID on our American Indian and Alaskan Native students.

And let me just also congratulate Dr. Proudfit on her appointment as the first Indigenous woman to the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls by Governor Newsom.

Here on campus, we are also reviewing our support services for women-identified students to look at how we can refine and build resources and opportunity for community, such as a new student center.

For our LGBTQIA+ students, our Pride Center started a roommate matching program this fall that supports students in finding living environments that are safe and affirming spaces.

And a Latin-x student experience workgroup is forming to assess gaps and make recommendations to improve belonging and student success.

This includes more robust support for our Dreamer Resource Office with expanded space and additional base funding to support their operating budget.

As we work to be agents of change in an unjust world, it’s never been more important that we add our ethnic studies requirement the next step in our work to further embed diversity, equity and inclusion values into our curriculum.

I know that this academic year will bring us many more challenges – and we aren’t out of the pandemic woods yet.

We have many obstacles to overcome . . . but at the same time, we have such an amazing foundation from which to launch . . .

. . . with so many wonderful stories of success to tell.

That's a final piece of our draft strategic plan – how we elevate our reputation in our region and beyond to garner good will and philanthropic support that will fuel our trajectory and take us even higher.

We're going to get the word out, and we're going to shine a spotlight on all the great things you are doing.

So, today as we welcome and embrace this new academic year, let us triumph over the difficulties and unite over our common inspiration.

Because, together, we have the power to support – support our young scientists, artists, and entrepreneurs so that they can pay it forward for the next generation.

We have the power to innovate; to believe in infinite possibilities.

We have the power to inclusively transform lives and communities.

We have the power to care – to embrace the common humanity in each of us.

And – within each of us - we have the power to keep growing and evolving.

It's about the individual power of you...

It's about the collective power of all of us...

It's about the power of CSUSM.

Go Cougars!