

January 11, 2017

Spring Assembly Address

Good morning and welcome back! Thank you to Provost Zelezny for her kind introduction and thank you to Senate Chair Kevin Ayotte, ASI President Tim Ryan and Staff Assembly Chair Katie Williamson for their continued leadership and support. And thank you to my favorite campus volunteer, Mary Castro, for being with us today as well.

I hope that all of you had an opportunity to refresh and renew during the holiday season with friends and family.

As we begin 2017, it is an appropriate occasion to focus on where Fresno State is now and on our very bright future.

As you know, Fresno State's logo emphasizes 3 D's -- Discovery, Diversity, and Distinction.

Today, I would like to focus my remarks on Distinction. What does distinction mean? In the context of our work together, distinction is defined by those tangible actions and accomplishments that set Fresno State apart from other organizations, including other universities.

Fresno State has achieved many significant accomplishments during its 106-year history that set it apart from other universities throughout the nation and world. Think about those pioneering faculty, staff and students in 1911 and their bold dreams. Could they have imagined what has occurred at Fresno State because of their early efforts? Fresno State is now a place that breeds distinction in our talented and diverse students, faculty and staff and in our close partnership with the community. Our efforts are paying off in many different and important ways.

Over the last year alone, we have achieved statewide and national distinction in many areas. The new Jordan Agricultural Research Center -- the only facility of its kind in the CSU; our Top 25 national ranking in Washington Monthly; our Number 1 public ranking in US News and World Report for graduation rate performance; and our decade of one million or more hours of community service are just a small sampling of areas of distinction. We also continue to prepare more K-12 school teachers than any other public university in California.

Underneath these rankings and numbers, we know that there is something far more important occurring at Fresno State. We admit, enroll and graduate in larger numbers than ever before talented students from families at all income levels. We serve students who are fourth generation in their family to Fresno State -- like President Ryan -- and others who are starting that legacy of academic distinction in their families as first generation to college students. We meet our students where they are and we provide a quality, high-value education. This is one of the reasons why so many of our faculty and staff stay and dedicate their energy to Fresno State. Our faculty and staff believe that our students and their families deserve the very best.

Fresno State now charges the least amount of tuition and fees of any of the 23 CSU campuses. We also provide over \$220 million in financial aid, about 80% of which is in the form of grants and scholarships. Our DISCOVERe Program has saved participating students – including about 10,000 students this academic year -- over 70% on their textbook costs. For these reasons, loan indebtedness for our graduates is among the lowest in the nation. (Slide 5 -- DISCOVERe slide). The CSU system is the best value in our nation and possibly the world. What does this mean for Fresno State? We provide our students with one the best values in public higher education in the nation.

And, at Fresno State, academics and athletics continue to rise together! Our student athletes continue to excel inside and outside of the classroom. I am pleased to share with you Jacob Vazquez, a senior from Red Bluff who is on our football team, was named an Academic All-American in December. He is just the seventh such student athlete in Fresno State's history to achieve this extraordinary honor. Congratulations, Jacob!

That is distinction!

Fresno State is distinctive in other very important ways. For example, we are modeling for our students, alumni and friends how adults engage each other with respect during a challenging period of time in our society.

Our nation is deeply divided in so many fundamental means. At a time like this, Fresno State can and must play a critically important role as a venue where a wide range of ideas and opinions can be discussed.

We will continue to support freedom of speech by emphasizing that an array of viewpoints and perspectives are welcome on our campus. We will also continue to foster a culture of inclusion where every voice matters and everyone has an opportunity to thrive.

It is imperative for all of us to speak up whenever others on campus speak or act in ways that are not aligned with the core values of our institution.

While this, at times, may be a delicate balance, I believe that we must lean in to model leadership in this area for our students and our community. We have a unique opportunity to help prepare our students -- the next generation of leaders -- to lead in similar or even more challenging circumstances in future decades.

I invite you to participate in the conversations, workshops and seminars this Spring where you can share your thoughts and, just as importantly, listen carefully to the thoughts of others -- especially when they differ from yours.

In all times, but especially today, leadership matters. The Cabinet members and I will continue to model listening, understanding, compassion, and empathy. I ask all of you and everyone at Fresno State to join us in demonstrating to our students how our university embraces them and their success.

As we succeed in this area, our Fresno State graduates will distinguish themselves in the Central Valley and beyond. They will be knowledgeable about their field of interest and its context within our world, listen carefully to and learn from others, and be authentic, collaborative and compassionate leaders.

Fresno State's distinction is modeled by each member of our community. Today, I have an opportunity to recognize a few of you who have -- through your consistent actions and accomplishments -- raised the level of distinction at Fresno State.

Our extraordinary faculty members share their special gifts in the classroom through educating and empowering our students for success.

Professor David Lent is a prominent example of academic distinction at Fresno State. Dr. Lent joined us as an assistant professor in the Biology Department in 2012. Three years later, he received the 2015-16 Provost's Award for Promising New Faculty. And, a few months ago, Dr. Lent achieved something that nobody else ever has at Fresno State -- he received the National Science Foundation's Faculty Early Career Development Award. When I met with Dr. Lent to congratulate him on this award, he impressed me with his passionate commitment to mentoring students. Congratulations and thank you, Dr. Lent!

An equally compelling example of academic distinction among our faculty is Professor Emma Hughes. Dr. Hughes is Associate Professor and Chair of Criminology, Fresno State's largest academic department. She also leads the CSU Project Rebound grant, a support program for formerly incarcerated students at Fresno State who are turning their lives around through higher education. Dr. Hughes models academic distinction on campus and in her scholarly and community service work in prisons throughout the Valley and beyond. Congratulations and thank you, Dr. Hughes!

Our passionate and committed staff also play a critical role in supporting student success at Fresno State.

William Hardaway, Academic Support Coordinator in the Learning Center, has modeled distinction on our staff. He leads our campus's tutoring program, which employs nearly 50 tutors. William has redesigned tutor training to include skills to empower student tutors after graduation and improve the quality of tutoring. He has collaborated with academic departments and student service programs to expand tutoring for upper division mathematics courses, students with disabilities and to provide tutoring in satellite locations across the campus. William's work is transforming how Fresno State provides academic support to students and empowers their success. Congratulations and thank you, William!

Speaking of academic success, Fresno State distinguishes itself today by having student success rates that are above the CSU average. This was not the case just a few years ago. However, we cannot rest on this success. We have much more work to do to reach our six-year graduation rate goal of 70% and our four-year graduation rate goal of 38% while eliminating our graduation gap by 2025.

Our ability to make dramatic progress in supporting student success has required us to know how we are doing in a wide array of areas. This is where Dr. Angel Sanchez and his team have played an essential role. As Associate Vice President for the Office of Institutional Research, Dr. Sanchez has led many collaborative projects. Whether it is guiding the development of CSU system or Fresno State data dashboards, training others to use these dashboards, advising the President's Commission on Human Relations and Equity on a Climate Survey or identifying bottleneck courses to improve course access, Dr. Sanchez has used his valuable intellectual gifts to advance Fresno State. Congratulations and thank you, Dr. Sanchez!

Fresno State's current and future success is linked to our ability to strengthen partnerships with our alumni and friends throughout the Valley and beyond.

Bruce Whitworth from University Advancement has played an invaluable role in moving us forward in this area. Bruce has led the planning of the President's Community Conversations throughout the Central Valley. Over 600 alumni and friends have attended the first six conversations and many more are expected for the next two scheduled for this spring. I appreciate Bruce's excellent planning skills and his ability to collaborate with many different partners on and off campus to make each conversation successful. Congratulations and thank you, Bruce!

Last year, at this time, we were finalizing our campus' five-year Strategic Plan. After many hours of energetic and passionate discussions by our campus and community, we adopted a plan that is elegant in its simplicity while being inspirational and aspirational.

Our mission -- to boldly educate and empower students for success -- inspires me (and I hope you) to get up each morning and do my best at Fresno State.

Let's take a look at our four priorities (on the screen). They continue to be exactly the right ones for our time.

Before my speech this morning, there was a presentation scrolling with a summary of our major recent accomplishments -- all in sync with our strategic direction. I hope that you had an opportunity to see it. The challenge we now face -- a very good one -- is that they are too numerous to mention in my speech today. I want to express my gratitude for all that you have done to begin realizing the goals set in our strategic plan. By accomplishing these critical goals, we are elevating Fresno State to new heights of success in serving our students. That is distinction!

In order for us to achieve our remaining Strategic Plan goals, we must continue to align the allocation of our scarce resources with our priorities. Over the first four years of my presidency, we have allocated almost every new permanent dollar from the state to our faculty and staff in the form of salary and benefits increases. This was exactly the right thing to do. In the coming years, while we continue to support our people, we will need to invest more of our public and private resources to improve and enhance our physical and technological infrastructure. All of us, especially the students we serve, will benefit from these investments through better teaching and learning and student support spaces.

I hope you have noticed the many improvements -- new roofs, HVAC systems, elevators, and teaching and learning spaces that have already been completed with our campus' recent \$20 million investment. Check out the new quad! It is beautiful! More progress is on the way as we identify and secure new resources to address this compelling need.

We are also making progress with plans for Zimbra email migration. After considerate deliberation with the Zimbra migration committee, our consulting firm and Cabinet, we chose March 27, 2017 as our Google go-live date for the campus. We will host a number of basic and advanced training sessions before and after the launch of our new Google email and calendar system. In the meantime, our campus leadership (by this I mean our Cabinet or designees) will be reaching out to some of you to identify volunteer "Google guides" who will help prepare our campus for the launch in March. Please stay tuned for further updates from our CIO.

With respect to our Strategic Plan, I urge us all to review our mission and four priorities this week and to reflect on the vital role we play in helping Fresno State fulfill one or more of them. I invite us to challenge ourselves to think about how we can be even more effective. What tools or skills do we need to be more effective? Are we open to new ways of doing our jobs differently that improve how we educate and support our students? Our full potential as a university can and will be realized as we individually -- and collectively -- answer these questions and take steps to optimize our contributions.

In his most recent book, "Thank you for Being Late", Thomas Friedman describes in a uniquely compelling way the many forces of dramatic change occurring at once across the globe. He discovers that the changes in how our world works and lives, driven by extraordinary advances in technology, are occurring faster than we are able to adequately comprehend them from a social or political perspective. There are obvious implications for Fresno State and each of us. We must stay current to continue thriving as a university.

Friedman cited an insightful 2014 Gallup Poll of college graduates in the U.S. who had been in the workplace for five or more years. It has special relevance for us today. The poll of one million respondents found that the most successful employees in our national workplace cited at least one professor or staff member "who cared about them as a person", "a mentor who encouraged their goals and dreams", or "an internship where they applied what they were learning". I would urge us to examine our internship opportunities across the campus and identify ways to serve more students even more effectively. I am prepared to invest more resources in this area and ask Provost Zelezny and Vice President Lamas to convene their respective colleagues to develop a plan this Spring.

Colleagues, as we look ahead in 2017 and beyond, I urge us to keep at the forefront of our minds that our work at Fresno State is professional and personal. Yes, we provide formal and informal certifications that many of our graduates need to get the jobs they desire. But our role is even more impactful and meaningful than that alone. Through our authentic, caring interactions and personal relationships with our students, we are mentoring them, preparing them to be leaders -- here in the Valley and around the world. And they, in turn, will pass that gift of mentorship and leadership on to the generations that follow. Just like the pioneering faculty, staff and students did during Fresno State's early years over a century ago. That is distinction!

In conclusion, I want to thank you for the past three and one half years of adventure with you. I have been fortunate to serve at many fine public universities in my career. I am convinced that Fresno State is blessed with almost unlimited potential. We have embraced the ideal that talent exists everywhere with a passion that I have never seen before in a university setting. That is why 70% of our students are first generation to college, which is virtually unparalleled in a four-year university in our nation. We are now on a trajectory of distinction that I have not experienced in my almost 30 years of service. We are today's pioneers of Fresno State and we are in sync with the community we serve.

And here's the best news yet -- we have much more exciting work ahead! How will we distinguish ourselves as individuals and make a lasting impact on the lives of our students and our university in the semester and years ahead? That answer lies within each of us. I urge you to share this answer with each other and with me.

With the strong foundation of over a century of academic distinction to build on, I can say with full confidence that Fresno State's best days lie ahead.