State of the University—Fall 2014

Good morning. Thank you all for being here this morning—or for joining us remotely via technology. One of the many joys of working at a university is the inspirational sense of new beginnings when we start a new academic year. This is particularly profound for me as I start my first year as president of Eastern Washington University. How many of you are new to Eastern this year as well? Welcome to you! I’m also pleased that we have a Board member here this morning—welcome Trustees Kauffman and Murphy.

It is inspirational also to start the new year with a conference focused on student success—planning for student success—and enhancing, building on the successes we’ve already achieved. I’m so delighted to have Drs. Gardner and Barefoot here as very special guests. I had to be at a Council of Presidents meeting on the west side yesterday, but I could feel the excitement and creative ideas swirling around when I came in this morning. I am very appreciative of everyone on the planning committee who has worked to make this conference a success.

My first two months here have been a whirlwind. I’ve tried to meet as many people as possible before the new academic year started. So I’ve met with a broad swath of university and community college leaders, city and Chamber folks, Foundation Board members, retirees and alumni—as well as the governor and key legislators.

I’ve also tested my physical expertise—throwing out the first pitch at an Indians game, doing the coin toss for the Sam Houston game, dropping the puck for a Chiefs game, playing croquet with the Associated Student leadership—and taking on the ice bucket challenge put to me by Congresswoman McMorris Rogers. I hear there’s also a mechanical bull-riding contest being planned for Oktoberfest, but perhaps I can pass that particular challenge on to an adventurous colleague.

In August I was pleased to spend time with other staff and administrators as we telephoned students who were enrolled last spring but had not enrolled for fall classes. And I have enjoyed greeting new students and their very happy families at firstSTEP orientation events and during move-in day. I’ve also met with a number of College groups as they gathered for their retreats at the beginning of the year.

This university really knows how to start a new academic year. Move-in day was amazing—staff, faculty, and students were beautifully organized to help families unload and move their students into the halls. Everyone was upbeat and friendly. Serving freshly baked cookies to the tired families and volunteers was a great idea.

Convocation was a beautiful ceremony for new students—pass through the pillars—movies, dances, even shopping for students—so many events that provide tremendous opportunities for students to get to know each other and to have friendly faces they can turn to throughout their years here at EWU. All these events take tremendous planning and hard work. Many, many thanks to the many people who make those events seem so effortless. The welcoming events and strong sense of tradition are incredibly valuable.
assets for this university. Lots of family members told me about their experiences at other universities—and Eastern was far and away the most welcoming and personal of any place they had been. Families were thrilled.

The Welcome Back Breakfast was wonderful. I appreciate all the work faculty did to make that event such a wonderful, warm welcome for everyone.

I have felt a warm welcoming experience myself over these past weeks. And everywhere I go, I sense the love that people feel for Eastern Washington University. I hear from alumni (often second- and third-generation Eagles) and community members about the positive impact that EWU has on individuals, families, and the region. I was delighted that the city of Cheney participated so actively in August when we hosted the first football game in the nation.

Even at Husky Stadium a few weeks ago, those of us wearing red Eagle gear were treated with great respect. We heard from many Husky fans about their positive connections with Eastern and their admiration for what we do—on and off the football field.

This talk is advertised as my state of the university address. In a nutshell, I will say the state of Eastern Washington University is excellent. There has been so much good work done here over the past years.

- Transforming curricula and student experiences through Critical Foundations, First Year Experience, the developmental math initiative;
- Supporting student success through the Learning Commons;
- Creating new opportunities for students, economic development, and community engagement through establishment of the College of Health Science and Public Health—and now we have a building to call our own on the Spokane campus;
- Enhancing community partnerships and applied learning opportunities through the first phase of a Sustainability Center;
- Enhancing student engagement through improved residence halls and new student programs;
- Providing support and a sense of community through the Veterans Resource Center;
- Supporting student progress through four-year degree pathways;
- Increasing opportunities for students to have career-related experience prior to graduation.
- Renovating buildings and making sure the campus is beautiful and welcoming.

I’m delighted that we’ll be bringing about 3,500 students here next spring for NCUR, the National Council on Undergraduate Research.

And we have positive numbers that emphasize our progress. Since 2009

- Overall headcount enrollment increased 13%.
❖ The entering freshman class increased in diversity from 27% to 31%.
❖ Freshman to sophomore retention improved from 73% to 75%.
❖ Passing rates for developmental math classes increased from 48% to almost 66%.
❖ Fall occupancy in residence halls increased 20%.
❖ We’ve had record numbers of students participating in community engagement activities.
❖ The EWU Foundation endowment portion dedicated to scholarships increased 60% to over $14 million.

These are great numbers, but, of course, data don’t really show a university’s achievements. The true successes are in our student stories. For example:

Our student Mauricio Zumba, a U.S. Army veteran, received a Pat Tillman Foundation Scholarship, one of the most competitive scholarships awarded to student veterans. He was one of just 59 individuals nationwide to be named a Tillman Military Scholar.

AND, for the 13th time in program history, our women's basketball team, earned a spot on the national basketball Honor Roll. Last year's squad had a cumulative team GPA of 3.615. Congratulations to them, and to all of our hard working student athletes.

Each of you, I’m sure, has wonderful examples of students who have flourished here and have gone on to great things. In fact, some of you ARE those graduates who went on to do great things—you’re here transforming the lives of students. EWU is thriving. If you have examples of student successes, Eagle stories—please send them to me. I really want to be able to celebrate our successes.

While still being new to Eastern and seeing through the eyes of newcomer, I’ve been thinking about some of the images connected with our university. The most obvious image, of course, is our eagle. The eagle is such a great symbol for this university. Eagles are impressive. They’re incredibly beautiful and awe-inspiring. They have excellent vision. They’re strong. They flourish all over the globe—from North America to Australia. And they’re adaptable: some have adapted to forests, others to open country, yet others to watery regions and other habitats.

I’m delighted that Eastern’s eagle evokes versatility and adaptability—and also inspires great awe and respect.

Adaptability is key. We can’t thrive and stay the same—not while the economy and the society around us are changing profoundly. We’re doing great things, but we can’t rest on our laurels. So: How can EWU successfully build on the momentum of the past productive years? How can we truly move the needle? How can we ensure that the work we do continues to transform lives for the next decade, for the next hundred years? Yes, we’ll continue to see budget challenges in terms of state support, but that should not deter EWU from thinking big.
A large group of university leaders continued strategic thinking and planning through this past summer. Then, as I worked with leadership over the past weeks, we examined ways to build on the work already done, to increase focus, and to create a powerful vision moving forward.

Our mission statement is wonderful—short and to the point:

**EWU expands opportunities for personal transformation through excellence in learning.**

I’ll say it again:

**EWU expands opportunities for personal transformation through excellence in learning.**

That is a perfect mission statement for us. **Student success, student learning,** remains the first and fundamental theme for EWU. Just about every college and university in the country says it’s about student success. But we can be—we **should** be—the institution that has “cracked the code” for student success. We should be a national leader for successfully attracting, retaining, and transforming the lives of all students, including under-represented, first-generation, non-traditional, and diverse students of all backgrounds—through learning.

The second theme for strategic planning is **Innovation and Opportunity:** what we can do creatively to expand the opportunities for student success, for personal transformation through learning? EWU should be a **national leader** in developing creative pathways for students to complete degrees. Our curricula, research, and scholarly activity need to anticipate and respond effectively to shifting social and economic challenges and opportunities.

The third strategic planning theme remains **Community Engagement.** And again this theme is coupled with the over-arching commitment to student success. EWU should be recognized as a significant engine powering the state. EWU should be seen as the public university whose students, faculty, staff, and alumni make profound and significant contributions to the economic and social vitality of the region.

And, as a tangible part of our commitment to students, EWU should also remain the best value for higher education in the state.

With these goals in mind—student success, innovation and opportunity, and community engagement—the strategic plan for the next three years outlines several significant new initiatives. Other key projects, such as Critical Foundations, are extremely important and will continue forward. New initiatives, based on nationally recognized best practices, are intended to complement ongoing work and substantially move the needle for EWU.

These initiatives include:
❖ State-of-the-art advising for all students.
❖ A teaching academy to support faculty in an environment of shifting technologies and expectations. Faculty are fundamental to students’ success—how can we help them in their important work?
❖ A mentor program that connects every first-year student with a faculty or staff member.
❖ An aggressive campaign for scholarship fundraising.
❖ Powerful pre-college programs and outreach initiatives for middle-school students, particularly from Hispanic and Native American communities, to ensure they are on the track for college.
❖ Innovative pathways to degrees that include hybrid and online programs and close collaborations with community colleges.
❖ A powerful focus on civic engagement throughout the curriculum.
❖ A campus-wide sustainability action plan to establish EWU as a nationally recognized green campus.

And, again, we will also continue our focus on outstanding Critical Foundations and first-year experience programs that I’m sure will be further inspired by the work over these two days. I very much look forward to working with the faculty Senate, with student government, and with other campus groups as we move forward.

For all these initiatives to be successful, the key is collaboration, collaboration on and off campus. The initiatives and the goals we have established for success can’t be achieved by one individual or one department. Partnership and teamwork are crucial. In some instances, we will need to do things differently, to break down siloes between areas, to bring together programs that have been working independently.

A couple of weeks ago, I brought together a large group of folks who’ve been working on strategic planning. I asked them to think about the culture of EWU. Culture is how we treat each other, how we work together. You can have a beautiful vision and set great goals, but if the institutional culture doesn’t support the vision, it won’t go anywhere. Peter Drucker is supposed to have said, “Culture eats strategy for lunch.”

The planning group talked about how overall we have a very supportive atmosphere on campus, but we don’t always do a great job of working together. We don’t always pool resources or acknowledge the efforts of others. But, if we’re really going to implement big ideas at EWU, if we’re going to significantly move the needle for our students at EWU, we have to work together. Student success at the highest level demands the whole village, the whole community.

Here’s another brief student story: Nicholas Pontius is an Honors Scholarship recipient. This term he’s working as a paid intern at NASA’s AERO Institute in Palmdale, California. With support from faculty and staff in different areas of
EWU, he got this opportunity as a freshman. Collaboration as well as his own hard work helped him succeed.

Then this summer, when we learned that families affected by fires might be unable to send their students to EWU this fall, this university rallied and responded actively together—to ensure that students still had a financial pathway to our university.

We’re already doing great things together. Let’s push for even more success. Let’s be nationally recognized for the great work we do. Working together, we can impact student learning, student lives, even more significantly.

Here’s a vision for success. Working together, by 2017:

- Let’s increase 1st-year to 2nd-year retention rates to over 80%. We can do this.
- Let’s significantly increase the percentage of students who graduate in a timely manner.
- Let’s be recognized as the university that has the best student advising in the country.
- Let’s significantly increase minority, under-represented, and international student enrollment.
- Let’s make a huge increase in privately funded dollars to support our students’ scholarships.
- Let’s ensure that all first-year students are engaged in dynamic general education and first-year experiences that help them stay enrolled and be successful in college.
- The future of this university and this state depends on significantly increasing the college-going rates for students of first-generation families. Let’s significantly ramp up our outreach to diverse middle-school and high school students and families. Let’s get even more of them involved with EWU and help those students prepare for coming to college.
- Let’s dramatically increase the number of non-traditional students who never started or never finished college. There are thousands of people in the northwest who are under-employed and struggling in part because they never got a college degree. Let’s partner even more closely than we do now with community colleges and the businesses community to provide pathways for those individuals.
- Let’s ensure our students in all academic programs are prepared to be successful in the shifting economy of the 21st century. I tell families I don’t want their student moving back in with them when they graduate. We have an ethical imperative to do all we can to provide today’s students with skills and knowledge, with the learning they will need to be successful long after they have graduated.
- Let’s be known as the university that truly and profoundly supports faculty in a constantly shifting teaching and learning environment.
Let’s be recognized as a campus that works collaboratively to be environmentally sustainable. We can do this.

Achieving goals like these requires teamwork, focus, alignment, and commitment. However, EWU’s progress so far has been substantial. There is tremendous energy, great enthusiasm for big ideas that will truly move the needle for this institution. The initiatives outlined in the strategic plan are critical for transforming students, their families, and their communities. We can do this. We can do this together.

In these first few weeks in Eastern Washington, I’ve been struck by another image that is as powerful and inspiring as our eagle. And that’s our region itself—the distinctive landscape, the spectacular vistas of towering rocks and carved channels juxtaposed with wheat fields and rolling hills—everything stitched together by railroad tracks and roads and dotted with cities and towns.

Eastern Washington University is a regional university in a profound sense. Our unique region was massively altered by dramatic events, the flood waters that surged through this part of the world thousands of years ago. We are a product of our region, from a gathering place for the Spokane tribal nation to a train depot that brought people here from all over the globe. Our existence as an institution was jumpstarted by a donation from a former stagecoach driver, Benjamin P. Cheney, who saw the future in railroads—and in education.

We’re an institution deeply rooted in our region. But our reach, our scope, extends far beyond Cheney and Spokane. Just this fall, our incoming students come to us from over 30 states and 14 countries. Our faculty and staff come from all over the world. For over a hundred and thirty years, this institution has been transforming lives and entire families far beyond the boundaries of Eastern Washington. Like eagles, we adapted as needed to changing opportunities and challenges. We’re reaching out to students through technology and face to face in locations all over the state.

But we remain embedded in this region. We’re as distinctive and durable as the landscape around us.

Thank you again for welcoming me here over the past weeks. I’m delighted at the opportunity to serve as president of this outstanding university. I welcome feedback as we launch this new academic year and continue our focused, purposeful strategic plan. I’m so happy to join you all as an Eagle. We’re going to have a great new year—working together. Thank you!