

Fall Address 2019
BEYOND J STREET—CALIFORNIA'S CAPITAL UNIVERSITY

I cannot tell you how good it feels to look out and see the Hornet Family assembled together.

I am filled with pride, but more importantly, I am filled with hope.

It was a tough summer.

Last year was a tough year.

When I accepted this position, I never dreamed that I would write so many SacSends.

Heck, I didn't even know what a SacSend was.

But once we declared that inclusive excellence was one of our five imperatives, once the president of student government (ASI) challenged us to define inclusive excellence as becoming not just an inclusive campus where everyone belonged but also a caring campus where we valued each other, the SacSends just came.

And this summer, they kept coming.

Gilroy, CA, El Paso, TX, and Dayton, OH weren't just horrifying; they pierced Sac State's collective heart, and they deeply and personally affected many of us, some very directly.

We had students and coworkers at the Garlic Festival.

One of our fellow Hornets lost her grandfather in the Walmart in El Paso.

She took off for El Paso the moment she heard the news.

I want to thank everyone who donated to help her defray her expenses—Hornets have big hearts.

The gunman in that Walmart targeted Hispanics, specifically, people of Mexican decent.

He drove ten hours to kill people.

He didn't care that most were shopping for school supplies.

In some perverted way or another, he thought that he was stopping an "invasion."

And the gunman in Gilroy, who bought his assault rifle in Reno, was also targeting people of color.

He lived close to the Garlic Festival. He knew that families would be there celebrating.

From all we know, he didn't care.

The Garlic Festival provided him with a soft target, and he was motivated by hate, by pure hate, to kill as many people as he could.

In Dayton, the killer drove to that restaurant district with his sister.

Whether he knew that he was shooting at his sister or that he killed her, we will never know, but even though he is dead, his hate cut through our campus.

I had an executive director who told me that she didn't take her daughters shopping at a big box store because she feared that a shooter might choose that store as a soft target. She felt the pain of Dayton.

I didn't write about the more than 700 workers who were rounded up in Mississippi from seven food processing plants on the day before school started there, but I probably should have.

Children woke up crying, wondering where their mothers and fathers were, mothers and fathers who were employed and who came to America to provide their children with a better life.

Imagine the fear that our students have when they hear on the news that there are plans to arrest 1,000 undocumented people on some random weekend.

Imagine what it must feel like to be a DACA student or an undocumented student returning to campus or coming to campus for the first time.

Imagine what it must feel like to think that someone might shoot you with an assault rifle because the color of your skin or because they believe that you are part of an invasion.

Imagine adding that fear to the fear that ICE may show up on campus or at your door to arrest you, all because your parents brought you to America when you were a young child so that you could have a better, safer life.

Imagine fear, pure fear.

Many on campus are feeling that fear.

Last year, I did write about Stephon Clark.

I met students who lived on the same block as he did.

I met students who went to school with him.

I met his grandmother.

And I saw the fear and anger on our campus as people grappled to understand what happened, and then grappled with why there was no indictment.

I saw the tears and the pain.

And I wrote about the mosque in New Zealand.

I wrote about the synagogue in Pittsburgh.

I wrote about the Pulse Night Club in Orlando.

Why? Because we have students, faculty, and staff who are Muslims, Jewish, and LGBTQIA.

We have students, faculty, and staff who have been deeply and permanently touched, even wounded, by these events.

I wish that I didn't feel like I had to write these SacSends, but I feel that I must.

I must at the very least acknowledge what is happening in this world.

And what is happening is horrible.

Typically, at Sac State we lose 6 to 7 students per year to suicide, car accidents, illnesses.

This past year, we lost 16 — 16 Hornets.

We also lost Sheriff's Deputy Mark Stasyuk on Monday, September 17th.

He was a student in our Criminal Justice program.

He was shot in the line of duty, while responding to a disturbance call on Folsom Boulevard.

He left behind a young wife, a grieving sister, and so many loving friends.

At graduation, we awarded him a posthumous degree.

It broke my heart to be on the stage with his family—so much pain, but so much pride and love too.

We lost Officer Tara O'Sullivan, a graduate of our Law Enforcement Candidate Scholars program.

She was the first female commander of her class.

She joined the police department in January 2018.

And this past June, too many of us witnessed on television the bloody shoot out that took her life.

We will celebrate her with a flyover at the first football game this year, which will be dedicated to the men and women who serve us in law enforcement.

We have dedicated a chair to her in the new planetarium.

And we have already raised over 30,000 dollars for a scholarship in her honor, with a goal of raising 50,000 dollars.

But no amount of dollars can bring her back.

So why I am telling you these stories?

Not just because I am worried about the world in which we are living.

Not just because I feel the fear, the pain, the frustration, and the anger that others on our campus are feeling.

Rather because I serve a great university, a university that is California's Capital University.

A university that transforms lives by preparing students for leadership, service, and success.

A university that redefines the possible.

A university that can take all this darkness and turn it into light.

A university that can and will transform Sacramento and the Sacramento region.

A university committed to ending the fear, the pain, the frustration, and the anger that I have been describing.

A university that will reach out beyond 6000 J Street and will redefine what a university is.

A university that Sacramento needs.

Sacramento and the greater Sacramento region needs us, needs us to be California's Capital University in more than name, a true anchor university investing our energy, our wisdom, our spirit, our human capital in our community.

We will never lose sight of our students.

Sacramento State will always be a student-centered university.

But we must transform our university by putting our students at the forefront of transformation and change in the community.

Five years ago, a year before I came here, our campus adopted a 2014-2020 Strategic Plan.

The Strategic Plan had a powerful mission statement that you have heard me reference over and over:

"As California's Capital university, we transform lives by preparing students for leadership, service, and success."

The plan also had 6 strong goals:

1. Enhance student learning and success
2. Foster innovative teaching, scholarship, and research
3. Commit to engaging the community by building enduring partnerships that strengthen and enrich the region

4. Engage students in a comprehensive university experience
5. Excel as a place to learn, work, live, and visit
6. Promote a strong University identity

The plan also proscribed some strategies to realize those goals, and some very specific indicators or benchmarks of success, though not for every goal.

What the plan lacked was specific initiatives to reach those goals—it needed a series of action plans like implementing structured scheduling so that students could finish their general education courses on time, like adding a thousand sections of classes so that students could get the courses they needed, like creating student success centers so that students could be advised in their own colleges.

The plan needed a “how”—it failed to say what we were going to do to meet the various benchmarks.

It needed to lay out how to help seniors take summer courses by giving them Provost Grants so they could graduate without waiting for a whole new semester.

It needed to show how to hire more diverse faculty by training search committees, by adding diversity statements, by advertising in non-traditional venues, etc.

Because we didn’t have those specific initiatives outlined in the strategic plan, we subsequently simplified the plan into five imperatives:

- (1) Student Success,
- (2) Diversity and Inclusion,
- (3) Philanthropy,
- (4) Safety and Well Being, and
- (5) Community Engagement (which has morphed into the Anchor University Initiative).

Under each of these five imperatives, we created the how for the strategic plan—we developed action plans to increase graduation rates, to close the achievement gap, to increase the number of scholarships available, to diversify the faculty, to reduce the number of DFW courses, to make our campus a caring campus, and on and on.

So, using the assessment benchmarks in the 2014-2020 Strategic Plan, how did we do?

I am not going to lie to you—we don’t have data for some of the benchmarks.

We don’t know how many formalized partnerships that we have, or how many community members are on university advisory boards, or how many faculty and staff are participating on regional boards and advisory groups.

We don’t know how many visitors visit our campus or how many students participate in campus-based activities.

And we certainly don’t know how many events happened on campus in any of the last years—we have only recently created a campus-wide calendar.

But we do know a lot, especially about student success, and most of what we know is fantastic, though there is some disappointing news.

We were supposed to increase the 4-year and 6-year graduation rates by 24%.

We actually met and exceeded the 6-year rate and achieved a remarkable 4-year rate increase of 128%.

We were supposed to raise the 2-year and 4-year transfers student graduation rate by 12%.

Sadly, we only raised the 4-year rate by 8%, falling short.

But we raised the 2-year rate by a whopping 87%.

With our goal to close the achievement gap by 50% in degree attainment for our underrepresented minority students and our non-represented students, we had mixed results.

The gap for our students graduating in four years unfortunately saw a slight increase, from 2.7 percentage points to 2.9 percentage points.

For those graduating in six years, the gap was even wider, from 9.6 percentage points to 12.7 percentage points.

Somehow last year with this group, we went from a 0.1 percentage point gap to a 12.7 percentage point gap—we are still analyzing why.

For transfer students, those graduating in two years saw the percentage point gap drop from 6.2 to a negative -0.4, which means the URM students graduating in 2 years are doing better than the Non-URM students.

For transfer students graduating in four years after enrolling at Sacramento State, the gap dropped from 5.4 to 0.9.

So overall mixed results with closing the achievement gap, which shows that we need better action plans for the future.

With other measures, we did better.

In 2014, no one would have ever imagined that Sacramento State would eliminate remedial classes.

Our goal was to move from 47% of our students not needing remedial classes to 53%.

When we stopped offering remedial classes, that number had already risen to 58%, five percentage points better.

In Fall 2014, only 8% of our transfer students came with an Associate's Degree for Transfer.

In Fall 2018, 22% came with an ADT—a 159% improvement.

No overall goal was set in the 2014-2020 Strategic Plan on how many of our students would be employed full-time after graduating, but the number has increased by 2%.

In the past year, 57% of our graduates are employed in the career of their choice.

Unfortunately, at least in my opinion, 2% fewer of our graduating seniors are enrolling in graduate school.

Students are participating more in research-oriented events—135 participated in the Fall Workshop and another 82 in the Fall Forum.

The measure that bothers me the most is that amongst the students surveyed, the satisfaction levels for (1) the overall college experience, (2) the overall quality of instruction, and (3) the overall academic experience have all decreased 1% year over each year—that's nearly a 4% percent decrease in all three categories.

Obviously, we have work to do here too.

But it is good to know that of those students surveyed, when asked if they had to start over would they choose to enroll in Sacramento State again, over 3% more than previously said they would, indeed, choose Sac State—so we know that we have students who love this university.

There is more data that I can give you—for instance, in fundraising, we have seen an 85% increase (from \$14,236,085 to \$26,271,991) with 36% more individual donors giving to Sacramento State.

With research, just in the last year, we have seen an increase in the number of proposals submitted; however, we have also seen a decrease in the number of awards and overall grant funds.

We can't stop improving.

But I firmly believe that, at the end of this year, it is clearly time to move past our current strategic plan and adopt a new one, one with initiatives and action plans for every goal that will help us reach and even surpass our benchmarks.

We also need to write a strategic plan that will challenge us to surpass our Graduation Initiative goals, which are way too low.

We are much too dedicated and talented, our faculty and our staff are much too excellent, to have Graduation Initiative goals that are amongst the lowest of the 23 California State Universities.

We can't settle for a 33% four-year graduation rate—not when we are already at 20.8% and more than doubled our gain in the last three years.

Nor can we settle for a 63% six-year graduation rate—not when we are already at 54.4%, an 18% gain.

I know that we can be at the top of the CSU's.

Already our first-time full-time retention rate is 84.7%, nearly 9 percentage points above the national average of 76%.

Over the last 2 years, we have seen an 18 percentage point increase in the number of students who have progressed from the freshman year to their sophomore year and who are truly sophomores.

And in 2018, our incoming first-year students enrolled in (on average) 29 units—yes, more and more students are taking a full-time 15 semester credit hour load.

Most remarkable of all, our students with the weakest math skills upon entry (Category IV students) had an 83% success rate in general education math.

Previously, these students would have had to take one or two semesters of remedial math before even being allowed to take a college level math course.

We want our students to be successful, and we want them to want to be Hornets.

Our goal since the 2014-2020 Strategic Plan has been to become a destination university, a university that would be the first choice of a student when applying.

This year, over 44,000 students applied to Sacramento State—that's a lot of students.

Students using Cal State Apply, can apply to several CSU's; if you compare the number of first-time Freshman Applicants who only applied to Sacramento State for 2018 as compared to 2019, the number has dropped from 2,096 to 1,844 from 2018-2019, a 12.02% decrease.

Gratefully, we are doing better with Transfer Exclusive Applicants—those numbers have grown from 3,531 to 3,669, a 3.91% increase.

Those numbers are not where we want to be if we truly want to be a destination university.

All too often, we have blamed these sorts of disappointing numbers on our failure to tell our story better.

There's truth to that claim, but I think that we need to think differently.

I want to ask all of you: In the most colloquial terms, what are we known for? What is our brand?

We have some great academic programs, and I love our athletics.

But statewide, nationally, are we really known for those programs or our sports?

In the 2014-2020 Strategic Plan, we branded ourselves as California's Capital University—frankly, Don Gerth was using the term long before the strategic plan.

But what does that name really mean?

In last year's Fall Address and throughout the year, I tried to better define us by referring to us as Sacramento's Anchor University.

We just did a survey of our faculty, and over 300 responded.

The truth is, a lot of people are still wondering what an anchor university is, and how they fit into it, even though I think that Sacramento State has always aspired to be an anchor university.

What drew me to Sac State was not our sports or our claim to be California's Capital university.

What drew me to Sac State was the claim that we were, we are, the people's university.

We are about access and equity.

We see the world through a lens of equity.

But how do you put that equity into practice? How do you make it tangible?

You move the reach of the University beyond J Street—that's what it means to be an anchor university.

As faculty, staff, and students, even as administrators, we must consciously and consistently dedicate ourselves to being truly the people's university, to transforming Sacramento by transforming our students.

Universities were founded for the public good.

Many in America, especially many in the middle class, have forgotten that that is our mission.

Sadly, the general population seems to think that universities exist to train students for jobs. And I fear most of our students are choosing to attend Sacramento State solely to get a degree that will get them a job.

The jobs that our students get when they graduate are not the jobs they will have when they end their careers.

As I read last week, the average college graduate will have at least 11 separate jobs before they reach 50.

For me and my generation, it's hard to imagine having 11 different jobs.

Whenever anyone asks me to defend the university and all that we do beyond preparing students for a paycheck, I always say that we are preserving and, more relevantly today, saving our democracy.

In many ways, we are saving our democracy from the horrors that I described at the beginning of today's address, of racism, white supremacy, violence, hatred, and most of all ignorance.

But just as importantly, we are saving the humanity on which our democracy not only stands but also relies.

Students today may not fully understand that universities are preserving values, though the demonstrations on both the right and the left at campuses say differently.

I will admit that many of our students may be enrolled in Sacramento because, yes, they want a job.

But when you ask what type of job, 80% of millennials will tell you that they want a job that matters, a job with a purpose.

So here is the secret, the answer, one of the many reasons behind dedicating ourselves to becoming an Anchor University, to preserving democracy: we can become a destination university by being a university dedicated to giving our students a sense of purpose.

Where are our students going to get that sense of purpose?

At Sac State, they will gain that sense of purpose from their experiences with their professors transforming the Sacramento region.

At the same time, their professors will be transforming them into leaders who understand and appreciate service.

Yes, I am riffing off our mission, but I believe in our mission.

It's time to be the people's university, to be California's Capital University, and it can't happen just inside the confines of 6000 J Street.

My question to you, is what can you and your students do to transform Sacramento? What can you do to promote the public good?

Does it have to do with diabetes prevention in neighborhood quick marts?

Does it have to do with recycling when recycling is under attack as an inefficient practice?

Does it have to do with the manufacture and use of drones for crime prevention?

Does it have to do with buying from local small businesses?

Does it have to do keeping trash from blowing into the American River?

On your chairs, everyone has pencils and paper so that everyone can suggest what they can do to transform Sacramento.

And I am especially asking the faculty to tell us what specific things that you can do within your discipline, with your teaching, with your research, to transform Sacramento.

We will gather together that information and give it to the Anchor University Taskforce.

Our President's Ambassadors – please stand and wave - are here and will collect your suggestions as you leave.

For a year now, since last year's Fall Address, under the leadership of Dean Sheree Meyer, Professor Michelle Deng, and Vice President Phil Garcia, the Anchor University Taskforce has been meeting with the community to find out what the community needs from Sac State.

They have also been meeting with the faculty to help the committee understand what sorts of anchor work that the University is already doing.

Did you know that nearly two-thirds of our students were involved in experiential community-based learning in their freshmen year?

Did you know that last year our faculty were awarded millions dollars focused on outreach or engagement with community partners?

Yes, our faculty received 130 grants with \$6.3 million dollars going toward the educational pipeline and \$5.5 million dollars going toward public health.

As the people's university, we already are rooted in our community, and not with just academic work—that's what the Anchor University Taskforce has uncovered.

For example, in 2017-2018, the University had \$30 million in contracts with small businesses, microbusinesses, and businesses owned by disabled veterans.

Not only are our faculty engaged in anchor work; Business Affairs, Information Resources and Technology, Communications, Advancement, all divisions are also anchor partners with our community.

The Anchor University Taskforce has prepared the first draft of a white paper that we will be broadly disseminating this fall and that I propose becomes a key foundation of our next strategic plan, "Beyond J Street, California's Capital University."

The paper details Sacramento State's history of community engagement and provides examples of current anchor work that we are doing in this arena.

The paper also outlines easy, early wins as we become even more anchored in Sacramento and the greater Sacramento region—wins like expanding the arts in schools and communities, wins with water use and conservation, wins with expanding our pro bono clinics into communities where African American children are dying at twice the rate of other children, wins with environmental and disaster protection.

And, finally, the paper ends with a series of recommendations that will be critical as we hammer out the new strategic plan.

For me, what the white paper does best is challenge us to reimagine the role of the University, not only here on campus, but also in the community.

It asks us to think of the University as a "hub of partnerships."

It asks us to connect the "mission of the University with the wellbeing of the community."

It asks us to be a "thought partner."

It asks us to be open to the idea of a university being something "more than just classes."

It asks us to turn "theory into action."

In my opinion, what the paper and the taskforce are really proposing is that we make certain that when our students leave the University they will have a purpose because they have been engaged in purposeful work while at the University.

That purpose may have been found in an internship.

That purpose may have been found in studying the effects of homelessness on the American River.

That purpose may have been found in constructing tiny homes for those living in cars.

That purpose may have been found in writing a mile-long poem down an industrial street.

That purpose will come from “scholarly engagement with the world,” scholarly engagement in the community where Sacramento State is anchored.

We have to be dedicated to improving our community.

To give a very simple answer to why, just think about the current situation with Sac City Unified School District.

If Sac City Unified School District fails, we will fail.

I want to end the way I started, with a story, a story that relates to the students in Sac City Unified School District.

Some of you know Dr. Hazel Mahone.

She taught in the College of Education at Sacramento State.

She was the first female African American superintendent in the Sacramento area.

Hazel is my hero—we gave her an honorary doctorate at this spring’s graduation.

Since 1991, she has run the College Prep Math & Reading Academy every summer on Sacramento State’s campus.

The camp has yearly served 400 to 800 of the most underserved elementary and middle school students.

Most start totally deficient in both math and reading, virtually everyone well below grade level.

To me, it’s a miracle, but by the end of their time on our campus, every student is at least where they should be reading and math-wise, if not above.

The Academy’s graduation is a huge affair. Parents pack the ballroom.

Children are everywhere.

Most of their parents have never been on our campus before.

They are beaming with pride, and they shout and they holler for their kids.

Dreams are made at the Academy.

I look forward to that graduation every year as much as I do our own graduation ceremony.

I especially look forward to watching a few special students who are awarded a bicycle upon graduating.

Very few of them have ever even dreamed of owning a brand-new bike.

Every summer, Hazel has several hundred of the students write letters to me, thanking the University for hosting them.

I read those letters to help me weather the pain that I feel from the horrible events that I mentioned at the beginning of this Address.

This year, a student wrote me a second letter.

He was one who was awarded a bike.

It was a black and green bike.

He wrote to tell me thank you for the bike.

He also wrote to tell me that he would share it or give it away if I could stop them (whoever them is) from coming to take his parents away.

I am going to try to read that letter. Forgive me if I can't.

"Hi Mr. President Robert Nelsen,

Thank you for my bike, it is black and green.

If you are a president can you make them not take my family away?

I will share my bike too."

He is a student in Sac City Unified School District.

He is the reason why we have to do our best to make sure that Sac City Unified does not fail.

He is the reason why Sac State must dedicate itself to scholarly engagement with our community.

He is the reason why we will dedicate this year to writing a strategic plan that we will roll out at next year's Fall Address that will outline our role as an Anchor University, as California's Capital University, as the people's university.

He is the one who will give our students a sense of purpose.

He is the one who will make students choose Sacramento State first.

He is the reason, one of the many reasons, we must go "Beyond J Street."